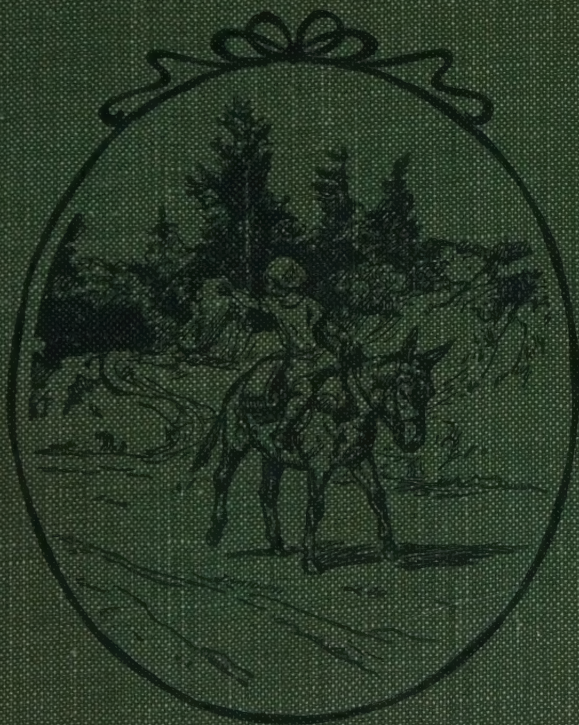


· BEYOND ·
THE HILLS



MAYSEL JENKINSON

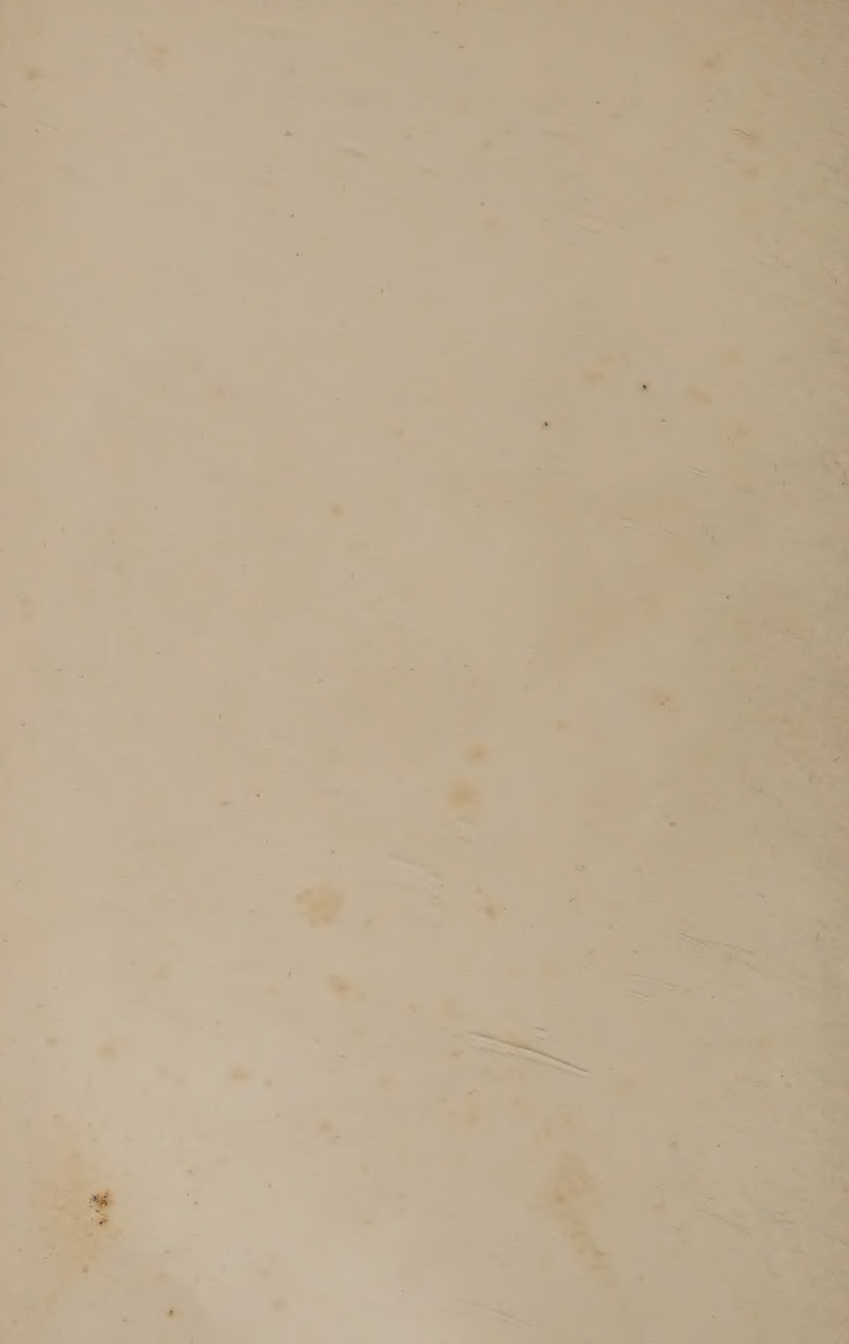


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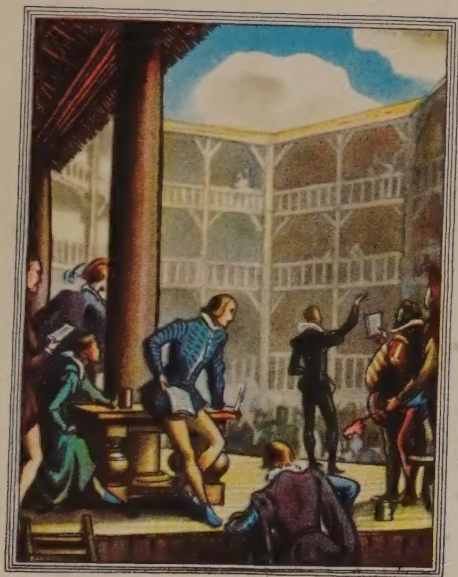




XMAS 1942.

To. SHEILA.

From. MARGARET.



A Rehearsal of "Twelfth Night" at the Globe Theatre
A.D. 1600

BEYOND THE HILLS



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Her gaze followed Dick's pointing finger.

p. 177

BEYOND THE HILLS

By
Mayse! Jenkinson



Illustrated by
REGINALD MILLS

FREDERICK WARNE & Co. Ltd
London & New York

To
" MARIE "

(*Founder of the Sunshine Guild*)

who
with kindly beckoning hand
has led these and many other of my little Travellers
towards the
Enchanted Unknown Hills

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Beyond the Hills

CHAPTER I

THE BECKONING HILLS

JUST across the water they lay, such a little way beyond the opposite bank of the broad, golden river. If you sat on the old wall at the foot of the garden you could see the whole long range of them, so tantalizingly near, so altogether unattainable. True, you always had the river; you had merely to run down the hill, scramble across a meadow and through a gap in the hedge, and it was there, with all its many moods, awaiting you. True, also, a very little walk would bring you to the hilly forest country, but then both river and forest were part of the everyday life and how can you find romance or adventure except you go out to seek it in the Unknown?

For it was the Unknown that attracted the three children, more especially the two elder ones. Not only the hills themselves in their shadowy, mystic beauty, but what lay beyond them—the great open, unexplored world where adventure would surely come leaping towards you. To find the open world,

to know Adventure ! For how could anything interesting ever happen if you just played in a garden or a paddock, or strained your eyes down the river or across the hills, simply wondering, wondering ?

There was more than one influence at work on the children to stir them to action. To begin with, there was that wander-blood in their veins that had sent their young Uncle Val wandering over the face of the earth. And then there was the river, the broad, gleaming river—an everyday river, of course, but was it not rushing swiftly to the sea and the open world ? Had not Uncle Val himself told them how it had called men to great adventures ? Sir Walter Raleigh, for instance. Sir Walter Raleigh, Billy's hero, was perhaps the biggest influence of all at work on the children. For, though this was not Devonshire, he had at one time inhabited the beautiful old house above the Gleam in which the children lived. Probably it was he who had whispered to Uncle Val of the Unknown, but whether that was so or not Uncle Val, in his brief home visits, was never tired of telling the children of the noble gentleman who had left his presence in the riverside house. He would make them see pictures of Sir Walter seated in the oak-panelled dining-room with perhaps Sir Francis Drake and other adventurers as his guests, planning their expeditions into the unexplored world ; or again, sauntering slowly down the drive and pausing at the white gate to look with half-closed eyes down the Gleam towards

the sea, sniffing the salt in the wind that blew up the river, hearing its call to him as it souged through the tall elms along the drive.

And then there was Stevenson. It was Aunt Letty who was responsible for introducing them to him and inspiring them with love and admiration for the man who was known in Samoa by that pretty name Tusitala. At least, Nancy, whose imagination quickly leaped towards any word that had poetry in it, any new and interesting word, found it pretty ; indeed, there were many words in the passages Aunt Letty read to them from Stevenson that appealed to her. *Caryatides* ! That was a word to make poetry of inside yourself and repeat over and over again until you had made it your very own.

Billy, on the other hand was more interested in Stevenson the man than in Stevenson the writer. His adventures in the *Arethusa*, his wanderings with Modestine, above all, perhaps, his life in those fascinating South Sea Islands appealed strongly to Billy. And the chief charm about all the adventures lay in the fact that they were *real* ; they were not just a story book ; Stevenson had actually lived what he described, had gone out to meet adventure just as he, Billy, longed so passionately to do.

Things came to a head one evening, while they were watching old Daddy Petherham drifting down the tide towards the sea.

“ Wouldn't you think he'd get tired of fishing

round here every day ? ” said Billy. “ Wouldn’t you s’pose he’d just *have* to go a little further and a little further and then right out to sea ? Wouldn’t you think he’d want to know what it’s like out there and sail away till he came to other countries and foreign people ? *I* should if I were Daddy Petherham.”

“ No, not if you were Daddy Petherham you wouldn’t,” Nancy replied. “ I’m sure he wouldn’t like not to sit in his doorway and smoke and watch his grandchildren playing. And wouldn’t it be funny not to see him sitting sometimes on the bench outside the ‘ Anchor ’ shaking his head in that funny way of his at the young fishermen ? It’s queer, but I always think of Daddy Petherham as part of Nestcombe ; he’s kind of grown into it.”

“ Well,” Billy replied, “ *I* shouldn’t want to live in a village till I’d grown to be one of the fixtures, would you ? ”

“ No,” Nancy replied thoughtfully, “ I don’t *think* I should. I—I want, I want—oh, it’s not easy to put into words just what I want.”

“ I know what *I* want,” Billy replied, decidedly. “ I want to have adventure, lots of it, and how *can* we if we just stay here ? Don’t you both feel,” he added eagerly, “ that we must have one ? Let’s go somewhere. We haven’t got a boat so we can’t sail away as Daddy Petherham could if he wanted to, but—but *how* shall we go, Nancy ? ”

Nancy, who had been seeing visions of the wants

that would not go into words ("dweaming dweams," as she used to call them when she was a little girl), came back to earth and stared at Billy.

"Do you mean it *really*, Billy?" she asked slowly.

"Do you mean a long, long way?" little Mavis added. "And see lots and lots of pretty places?"

"Yes, really and truly, a long, long way—where we've never been before!"

Now, it is quite probable that neither Nancy nor Mavis felt at that moment any imperative need in them to leave their happy home, for Mavis was a "home" child and Nancy, with her vivid imagination, could leave it at will to wander in a "Never Never Land," but if Billy wanted to go, why, then of course they wanted to go, too, for that one should do anything important without the other two was as impossible as for old Daddy Petherham not to sit year in, year out, smoking by his cottage door.

And, since it was decided that something must be done, both the girls entered with eager interest into Billy's plans.

"Would it do for us to have kind of travels with a donkey?" Nancy asked. "We've got Ladybird. There aren't any mountains, but there are the hills over there. Oh, Billy, I would *like* to see the other side of the hills; I kind of feel there's some wonderful land hidden away behind them. Could we get as far, do you think? It's a long way, isn't it? We'd have to go to Gleambridge and cross the river there and

then we'd begin to be in the hills, wouldn't we? Oh, Billy, could we ever get there?"

Gleambridge, the county town, was a quite familiar place to the children. It is one thing to go there by train with grown-ups on shopping expeditions, but to go by road through unexplored country towards a city that is the gateway of the land of your dreams—that is something quite different. The train journey leads you to tailors and drapers and dentists, well, and perhaps to cakes and ice-creams, and yes, of course, the cathedral; but the dusty, winding road leads you straight to a world of romance, out of which rises the fair tower of the cathedral, and beyond it and above it and around it the entrancing hills. Should they, could they go?

Thus it was decided. They would go for a week; not longer, as little Mavis thought that quite long enough to be away from "Muvee." They would leave a note of explanation assuring the grown-ups that there was no need to worry, and they would take Ladybird, their very own donkey, with them. This, of course, would occasion a re-christening ceremony, for though "Ladybird" was the nicest name imaginable for a little home donkey, for one who was to seek with them the open world nothing but "Modestine" would satisfy the young adventurers.

CHAPTER II

GREAT-AUNT HEWLETT

WITH fingers that trembled because of his excitement Billy fastened the strap of Modestine's girth.

"That's right! Now let's fix the blankets on. You help me, Nancy—I don't quite know how they should go."

Nancy handed the basket of provisions to Mavis and ran to Billy's assistance. It was one thing to harness a donkey you had tended and coddled for two years, but to fasten a not very tidy bundle of blankets on to the saddle when you were almost dancing with excitement was not quite so easy. Nancy when she had finished, eyed her work doubtfully. Somehow, it did not look exactly professional.

"We really ought to have had sleeping sacks like Stevenson," she said; "but then, he had more money to buy them with than we had, I s'pect."

With only nineteen shillings to feed and sleep three of you—and a donkey—for a whole week, sleeping sacks were a luxury not to be indulged in.

Their simple preparations did not take long to complete, yet many anxious glances were cast at the

house while they were in progress. Supposing they were discovered? Supposing Modestine should bray, supposing——

“ Oh, quick! Let’s start right away!” Billy whispered. “ I’ll haul you into the saddle now, Mavis. Are you ready, Nancy? Come on! ’

Very quietly the little procession crept down the drive and passed out into the road. Nancy and Mavis each gave one wistful glance back at the house where all was so still. If only the grown-ups could have come, too! Was it too late even now to go back and ask them to come? Why, up to this moment had there been that quite definite though unspoken thought in each child’s mind that adventure such as they were seeking was something those belonging to the grown-up world could not understand, would not appreciate? *Their* grown-ups were all such pals. After all——

Nancy glanced hesitatingly at Billy, but she said nothing, for his unyielding back, his steady, plodding walk, and the way his head was thrown back told her that he was pushing every bit of feeling and regret away from him. They had planned the adventure, they must be brave and go on—they *must* find what lay beyond the hills; all this Nancy read in Billy’s attitude, and, knowing her brother, she fell into step by Modestine and buried her own regrets.

It was not yet six o’clock, but they pushed on hurriedly as, until they were the other side of Riversham, a small country town a few miles off on the Gleambridge

road, they were likely to encounter people who knew them. Better, they decided, to get beyond familiar places while folks were yet a-bed.

"See! We're nearly at Nestcombe," Nancy said. "Modestine, dear," she continued, addressing the donkey, "please don't do anything naughty until we are past the cottages. There's people up, I know, 'cos there's smoke coming out of the chimneys, so *don't* 'tract their attention, will you?"

Modestine plodded on, wearing her most angelic expression. She was a creature of vagaries; at least, that is how a man who used to come to see Aunt Letty—our "nearly-Uncle Jim" as the children called him—described her, and the children, though the word hitherto had been an unfamiliar one, felt that it described their Ladybird exactly—so naughty and yet so lovable.

This morning, so far, the quiet, innocent mood was uppermost, whether because she felt the honour of her new name or because these early-in-the-morning happenings had taken her by surprise the children could not decide.

Nestcombe, the lovely little fishing hamlet on the outskirts of which their home was situated, consisted of a row of about a dozen cottages, a few outlying farms, and another handful of cottages in a lane branching off from the main road down to the riverside.

"Look!" Mavis whispered, as they passed the top of this lane, "there's old Daddy Petherham going

down to the river. He's too deaf to hear us, but I do hope he doesn't look round."

The old man, however, shuffled slowly and unheeding down the lane, his eyes turned toward the river, and, a moment later, the children were through the village making their way towards Nestley.

"Wasn't the river sparkly and golden!" Nancy said. "And, oh, isn't the morning sparkly, too! At least, I think it's going to be—look at that bit of goldy-pink in the sky."

"It's cold, though," Mavis said, shivering a little. "I'm glad we wore our knitted frocks."

Nancy's face puckered with contrition. She had forgotten that Mavis would be cold riding and insisted on stopping while the child put on her waterproof cloak.

"That's it. You'll soon be warm now, won't you? Come on, Modestine, we're ready, old lady."

Modestine, who had rested her head on Billy's shoulder during the halt, was annoyed at being disturbed and planted her legs firmly where she stood.

"Come on, Modestine, dear," Billy urged anxiously. "Ladybird, gee-up! Oh, do hurry, Ladybird! We won't even get to Nestley, leave alone Riversham, before lots of people are about, at this rate. Could you *make* her move, Mavis?"

Mavis did her best, but when Modestine's mind was made up it took more than the little girl's feeble strength to budge her. On each side of the obstinate creature



Mavis turned in the saddle and waved her hand.

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Nancy and Billy pulled with no result. Next, Nancy pulled and Billy pushed from behind; they gained a few inches, but that was all. They pleaded and coaxed, they told her their frank opinion of her, they wished they had not allowed her to share in their adventure, they even threatened to leave her there in the middle of the road, still Modestine stood immovable.

Suddenly, she lifted up her head and gave forth a terrific bray. All the troubles of every donkey in the world seemed to be voiced in that bray.

"Now you've done it!" Billy cried indignantly. "Be quiet, for goodness' sake, Ladybird. Shut up, I say!"

Almost before the words were out of his mouth Mavis had whipped off her cloak and flung it over the traitor's head. Modestine, surprised at the interruption, hesitated, shook the cloak off, and then suddenly trotted gently down the road.

Mavis turned in the saddle and waved her hand.

"She's all right now. I'll wait for you on the Riversham road if she keeps this up. Good-bye!"

Billy picked up the cloak and together he and Nancy briskly followed the fast-disappearing donkey.

They would only have one house to pass now before reaching Nestley, and though they glanced round occasionally to see whether anyone was in sight, they felt that they might safely give themselves up to the thrill of having really started out on their adventure.

And what a morning on which to set out towards

the Unknown! The pink and gold was spreading across the sky, the birds were rhapsodizing, and the air had that clean taste that belongs to the early morning.

Ah, here was Mill End, and there were the vast orchards of Brook House, with the brook meandering through them. Not far to Nestley now!

The church clock was striking a quarter to seven as they turned into the village street.

"Look! Mavis is nearly at the top of the street," Nancy whispered. "I do hope she gets past Aunt Hewlett's safely."

Great-Aunt Hewlett's trim white house stood at the top of the village, just beyond the church. It was the last house they would pass before the road forked off to Riversham.

The children watched Modestine anxiously, fearing that she might want to stop at the gate; for though Great-Aunt Hewlett was far too stern an old lady to coax a donkey with luxuries there were those of her household who spoiled the pretty animal. Would Modestine remember and refuse to pass the house?

Their fears, however, were groundless, and Mavis turned and waved a triumphant hand before she disappeared round the high wall of Aunt Hewlett's garden.

"Doesn't the bread smell good?" Billy said, sniffing in the delicious scent that came from the bakehouse across the road. "I could eat a huge chunk of new bread—I'm fearfully hungry."

They both were, for though they had drunk some milk before starting they had all been too excited to eat more than a couple of biscuits each and such meagre fare could not sustain healthy children in the fresh morning air for very long.

The good, wholesome scent followed them as they hurried up the street, and I am afraid it occupied so large a place in their thoughts that they had none to give to the pretty village through which they were passing. Probably, however, in any case, they would have been blind to the beauties of the place ; for Nestley was familiar ground and was something to be left behind as soon as might be. That they were hurrying with unseeing eyes through one of the prettiest villages in England they did not know. Indeed, what would it have mattered to them if it had been the prettiest village in the world ? Were they not out to seek adventure, and how could it begin until you had left every trace of everyday places and people behind you ?

Nestley, snuggling in the heart of rich meadows and orchards, with the brook gurgling down the centre of the street, and the houses growing over the brook, and the forest rising up beyond the village ; oh, yes, it was all dear and pretty, but it was a home-place, just as Daddy Petherham was a home person. Just how pretty the home village is you cannot know until you have travelled away from it and have seen it with your imagination eyes. Just how dear it is you cannot realize, if you are an adventure-person, until far away

from it you feel its influence and your heart aches for the familiar things that are Home.

And so, with more appreciation of Nestley's bakery than of its beauties, Nancy and Billy proceeded up the steep little street, glancing anxiously at Aunt Hewlett's trim windows. Aunt Hewlett, unfortunately, was a very early riser—*would* they get by safely?

"There she is!" Billy groaned.

Yes, there was Aunt Hewlett, tall and neat and stately and uncompromisingly stern, in a stiff black frock and white cuffs and collar and apron.

And she was beckoning them.

True, she was used to their early morning rambles and might not suspect anything, but Mavis was waiting for them and, besides, every moment of these early morning hours before they were likely to be missed, counted.

Wishing they could have pretended not to see her, and trying not to look too terribly guilty, they advanced up the path.

"Good-morning, Aunt," they said meekly.

The old lady looked down at them.

"Another of these morning walks!" she ejaculated, with a sniff. "Ridiculous nonsense!" She paused, and looked at Nancy.

Now most people knew her for a very severe old lady; nevertheless, behind her outward severity there was a very big spark of kindness, a large share of which she

gave to Nancy. There was something about the child's face that bothered the shrewd old lady.

"Too tender, too sympathetic," she would blurt out to Nancy's mother. "Too interested in other people and their troubles—bothers herself too much about them—let the world take care of itself, I say!"

Yet, though she might leave the world to look after itself, Great-Aunt Hewlett often went out of her way to spoil Nancy.

"Could you eat a hot buttered batch cake?" she asked in her severest tone. "Suppose the boy would like one, too! Come in, both of you—and wipe your shoes well; Lizzie's just washed the tiles."

"Oh, please, Aunt, I don't think we *could* eat one this morning, could we, Billy?" Nancy replied hastily. "You see, we had some milk and biscuits before we started."

"Eh?" Aunt Hewlett cried in astonishment. "Not eat one of Lizzie's batch cakes? What's the matter with the children? Aren't they good enough for you?"

"Oh, Aunt Hewlett, they're the nicest batch cakes we've ever tasted, but we're just not hungry this morning, thank you."

"Not hungry? Stuff and nonsense! Come along in and let's hear no more about it."

The children, realizing that the safest and quickest plan would be to accept the batch cakes, followed Aunt Hewlett down the wide, cool hall to the kitchen.

As a rule, Aunt Hewlett's house held a great fascination for them. It was so silent, so awe-inspiring, so altogether different from their own jolly home. Even the stately Persian cat was different from their own mongrel cats and kittens. And there was a scent, too, about the house that you could hardly define. You could not be sure whether it was beeswax or whether it belonged to the creepers on the tiled verandah, or to the scented geraniums, or the blue and gold pot-pourri bowl in the drawing-room where you always felt afraid of smashing the spindly legs of the chairs.

This morning, however, the children even forgot to walk on tip-toe (you *always* walked tip-toe in that tiled hall), so engrossed were they in planning how to get away quickly without arousing Aunt Hewlett's suspicions or offending her.

Lizzie, Aunt Hewlett's old maid, and, incidentally the children's and Ladybird's friend, was putting the last loaf into the oven as they entered the kitchen, and, on the table, were half a dozen golden oven or batch cakes just asking to be eaten. If the scent from Mr. Philpott's bakery had been tantalizingly fragrant, the scent here was a hundred times more so. Yet, though less than five minutes had passed since they had been aching for new bread, now that they could eat their fill all desire for it had fled.

Very deliberately Aunt Hewlett split open a couple of the golden bread cakes and spread them generously with butter.

"One between us would be enough, thank you, Aunt," Nancy ventured meekly, but Aunt Hewlett waved the suggestion aside.

"It's over two miles home if you're going back round by Etley, and if you can't eat a batch cake a-piece and be ready for a hearty breakfast when you reach home, well, all I can say is that the modern child is made of poorer stuff than the children of *my* generation. In *my* young days we'd have said 'thank you' and no more words about it."

Aunt Hewlett tossed her proud old head and her eyes flashed as she thought of the splendid stock the world produced eighty years ago. "Nothing finicky about us, I can assure you, my dear."

"Oh, Aunt," Nancy pleaded, fearing that she had hurt her, "we're not finicky, really, are we, Billy? Only——" She paused tremulously.

Billy glanced at her anxiously. *Would* she be a sport and play her part bravely? Knowing her tender heart he was a little doubtful. Suddenly, he threw back his head just as he had done when he had closed the home gate behind them. Here, at the very outset of their adventures was something that called forth his fighting instincts. Billy met it with ready response—he would take charge of the situation.

He took a huge bite out of his batch cake and, to his own surprise, as well as Aunt Hewlett's, grinned up at her with an adorable cheekiness.

"*Looks* as though we like them, doesn't it, Aunt?"

And can I have another, please, when I've finished this? Lizzie shouldn't make them so nice. Or shall I take it for Mavis—she's just on in front, and p'raps we'd better hurry else she'll think we're lost or something."

Mentioning Mavis he felt was thrillingly dangerous. Aunt Hewlett *might* make enquiries, and somehow or other the enquiries would have to be avoided, but the spirit of adventure was awakened in him, and he was ready to tackle any difficulty.

"Hum! So *that's* why you weren't hungry, I suppose," Aunt Hewlett replied. "Been quarrelling with her, have you? Six to one and half a dozen to the other, of course!"

"Oh, no, Aunt," Billy replied, "we've not quarrelled—she just went quicker, that's all. I've finished my batch cake," he added with an insinuating grin. "It was ripping!"

Aunt Hewlett, pleased that the batch cakes should be so appreciated, split open the remaining three, and, telling Lizzie to bring a paper bag, set to and buttered them.

Nancy, meanwhile, was struggling hard with hers. As Aunt Hewlett's back was turned Billy signed to her to break off the bigger portion and slip it under Mavis' cloak.

"Well," said Aunt Hewlett, "here you are, and those that think they won't spoil their breakfast can eat them going along. Nancy seems to have lost both her

appetite and her tongue to-day—and William,” she added, “seems to have found both.”

The half-hurt, half-puzzled look on the stern old face worried Nancy. She wished with all her heart that she could explain matters, but that was impossible she knew, without giving Billy away. Yet, what must Aunt Hewlett think of her? Usually it was she, Nancy, who chattered freely and confidently to the old lady whose sternness she could see behind while Mavis and Billy stood by in awed silence. And now to-day——

She ran toward her aunt and kissed her impulsively.

“Auntie dear, I do love you,” she said, “and I love the batch cakes and next time I’ll talk lots and lots to you. *Please* don’t not love me. Good-bye!” and, with tears very near her eyes, she fled from the house, Billy following.

“Well!” ejaculated Aunt Hewlett. For quite three minutes she stood where they had left her, thinking—and feeling again a pair of little arms round her neck. “Well, well!” she added, and then left the kitchen to go about her household duties.

Meanwhile, Nancy and Billy were flying round the corner to the Riversham road with all sorts of thoughts and feelings, jogging against each other as they ran.

They found Mavis seated on the top of a high stone stile, her arms round Modestine, her head pillowed on her neck. She opened her eyes very sleepily when they approached, and smiled.

“You seemed such a long time,” she explained,

"so I just closed my eyes. Why, what have you got there, Billy. It smells like new bread!"

"It is," Billy replied, "and some of it's for you."

They explained the cause of their delay to Mavis, a delay of which the child had fortunately been unconscious, as she had been longer in the Land of Nod than she had at all realized, as they trudged along the Riversham road, munching some of the delicious batch cakes.

"Let's keep the other two until we get through Riversham," Nancy suggested. "P'raps we might stop for a little rest then."

"Yes, and have our breakfast. 'Cording to Aunt Hewlett we ought to be jolly well ready for it!" Billy replied, with a grin. "'Sides," he added, "I didn't get the full benefit of the one I ate in the kitchen, I'm sure—didn't I bolt it just!"

CHAPTER III

THE LIBATION MAN

BETWEEN Nestley and Riversham, after the village school was passed, were only one or two large houses standing well back from the road, consequently the children felt free to give themselves up to the joyous freshness of the morning and step out to meet adventure with a song not only in their hearts, but on their lips.

Fortunately, Modestine not only liked music, but seemed invigorated by it and set out so briskly at times that Nancy and Billy had much ado to keep pace with her. If the song died away she would fall into her usual jog-trot, but Billy had simply to run in front and sing his lustiest and Modestine would respond with pricked-up ears and a quickened pace.

Presently, however, they drew near to Riversham and the singing ceased.

"Let's get through as quickly as possible," Billy said, "and let's hope Modestine behaves herself. If she sits down in the middle of the street as she did that time when we brought her in the cart—you remember?—well, there'll be a crowd and good-bye to our adventure!"

With beating hearts they approached the sleepy little country town. The church stood on a hill to the right and they glanced up anxiously at the clock. Not quite nine o'clock—good—people would not be abroad shopping yet.

“I forgot to wind my watch up last night,” Mavis said. “It’s stopped.”

With much pride she wound up the watch, for it was one that she had recently won at Billy’s school sports; the only watch between them, too, and they were depending on it. There might not always be church clocks and somehow, even on an adventure, it would seem strange to be timeless.

Riversham consisted mainly of one broad street stretching from one end of the town to the other. What activity there was amongst the inhabitants was apparently taking place indoors; a few small boys were scattered about; the butcher, like all butchers, was dashing recklessly down the centre of the street; the milkman ambled after him. An assistant in the draper’s shop under the trees glanced up idly, but curiosity evidently not being her strong point, she scarcely gave them a second glance.

“*Do let’s rest soon,*” Nancy said, “I’m getting a little tired, aren’t you?”

Billy would not admit that he was, but he owned that he was ready to justify Aunt Hewlett’s belief in him, so, when at the further end of the town they found a narrow lane branching off to the left, they

decided to take it ; it might have a suitable halting place tucked away in some unobtrusive corner.

“ But we’ll get back on to the Gleambridge road presently, won’t we ? ” Nancy said. “ This is a forest road and it’s the hills, not the forest we want, isn’t it ? ”

“ Yes, we know *all* about the forest,” Billy replied, “ inside and out, so of *course* it’s the hills we’ll make for.”

This, in spite of the fact that every step was taking them nearer to the deep heart of the forest, to a beauty and grandeur that was constantly changing. This great friendly forest, with its harmonies of sound and colour, this sheltering forest, with its unseen yet familiar voices, how were they to know that in rejecting it, they were rejecting something that was a part of themselves, just as Daddy Petherham was a part of Nestcombe ?

In a little while they came to a meadow, and beyond the meadow, with a gate leading invitingly into it, was a wood ; a very suitable halting-place, they decided, and without a second thought—for trespassing never troubled our young adventurers—entered it.

Billy paused as they were shutting the gate and looked at the little town in the valley and the peeps of golden river between its chimney-pots. Just across that river were the hills and to reach them they must tramp all the way to Gleambridge first.

“ Wish we could have gone by the Riversham

ferry," he said regretfully, "it'd have cut off miles, but the old man might ask questions—p'raps he wouldn't take us. Better stick to the road, I s'pose, though it's another sixteen miles."

"Shall we get there to-day?" Mavis asked. "'Course you must both take turns in riding Modestine, 'cos I'm nearly seven and needn't ride *all* the way. Shall we sleep at Gleambridge or in a wood?" she added, as they made their way across the meadow.

"I don't know," Nancy replied. "'Sides, a lot depends on Modestine."

Modestine, when they reached the wood, stood with her most angelic expression while they removed the blankets and provision basket to ease her for a while.

"Don't forget to take the bit out of her mouth, Billy," Nancy reminded him as he was loosening her girth, while she and Mavis unpacked the provisions.

It did not take two hungry little girls very long to spread out the breakfast for which they were all longing.

"Oh, Modestine! Look out, both of you!"

Nancy and Mavis turned at Billy's cry to see Modestine dashing towards them, and they too uttered a cry as she took a flying leap over the food they had spread on the grass.

"An' she hasn't even knocked the lemonade over!" Mavis cried, and there was a little secret admiration in her voice; Modestine, you see, in spite of her naughtiness was so dear.

“ A jolly good thing for her ! ” Billy said. “ And now we’ve got to catch her ! ” he added ruefully.

They looked longingly at the tempting food and hesitated. Should they let her roam until they had satisfied their hunger ? It was a lonely spot and nobody was likely to come, and yet—well, though they never had the slightest fear of trespassing, it was an unwritten rule with them that gates should always be closed after them, and that no damage should be done in any way.

“ An’ if we let her roam you never know *what* might happen ! ” They sighed, and gave themselves up to a breathless quarter of an hour’s coaxing and cajoling. At the end of that time, Modestine, apparently tired of the game, submitted herself to Nancy, rubbing herself affectionately against the child as she tethered her to the gate leading into the wood.

“ And now we can have breakfast ! ” Billy said with a sigh of contentment.

How good the food tasted up here on the forest road—the first breakfast they had eaten in a meadow—so different from *ordinary* out-of-doors meals. Picnics lead you nowhere—this meal——

“ It’s kind of the beginning of the adventure, isn’t it ? ” Nancy said. “ The christening feast. No—no, don’t laugh at me, I didn’t mean that. What’s the word I want ? Celebration, no, not ’xactly. Don’t talk to me for a minute, I’ll see it inside me presently. I do wish words wouldn’t run away just when you

want them. Initiation? No, that doesn't sound quite right." She shook her head and frowned. "Can't *you* think of it, Billy?"

"Me?" Billy asked, with a chuckle. "No, *I* don't know long words, an' I'm far too hungry to bother about them. Don't you want some more to eat, Nancy?"

Nancy took the huge slice of bread and butter Mavis passed her and ate it absently.

"I'll have to let it go just now," she sighed. "But don't you think we should offer up something to the God of Adventure? There's a word for that, too; what you offer, I mean. Li—li—— Oh, I wish Aunt Letty were here, she'd know both words. Li—— I've got it! Libation!"

"Oh, look!" whispered Mavis hurriedly. "Look behind you!"

"By jingo!" Billy exclaimed.

Nancy came down to earth with a start to see coming towards them through the wood, two men, and a dog which evidently belonged to the younger of the two. The elder man was a gamekeeper, Nancy decided swiftly, but his companion—was he a farmer and would he be cross and turn them out? She studied his face intently as he approached, and read there not only surprise but interest. Nancy liked him immediately and instinctively she felt that, if he was a farmer, he was something more besides; his interests extended beyond sheep and the price of corn she was

sure—not, of course, that she got as far as expressing the thought quite as definitely as this. She just *knew*.

Billy, meanwhile, had whistled to the dog, who, after sniffing round the boy was evidently satisfied that he was a person one could know, and allowed himself to be fed with biscuits.

Now, if you were a gamekeeper and you came suddenly upon three children and a donkey calmly settled upon the preserves for which you were responsible, the one idea in your mind would be to turn the whole party out as speedily as might be with perhaps a lengthy and fear-raising monologue thrown in, as to the inadvisability of trespassing. And if you were a gamekeeper and *alone*, that is what you would do; that is what your duty as a gamekeeper told you you should do; that is what you were absolutely tingling to do in spite of the restraining hand of a youthful master.

But if you were the owner of the preserves, and, if on a summer morning with happy, laughing skies above you, you came upon a picture of startling interest and beauty if the youth dancing in your veins shouted to you that the picture was a part of the glory of the morning? If the picture dissected resolved itself into a dainty, golden-haired fairy with a bloom on her cheeks like that of a ripe peach; a boy with mischievous, laughing eyes, and a dreamy child with chestnut hair who had searched the recesses of an apparently not empty little mind and brought forth

in triumph the word "libation"! And last, but not least, a donkey tethered to the gate through which you were intending to pass? If, too, you were more interested in human nature than in your preserves; if there was about each child something that suggested more than an everyday picnic, if an intense desire burned in you for enlightenment?

Mavis leaned forward and stroked the dog.

"Isn't he a dear and isn't he friendly? Is he your little dog?" she asked, smiling up into the game-keeper's taciturn face.

"No," he replied laconically.

Meanwhile, the owner was standing with his hand on the gate in a tentative attitude.

"Oh, Billy, Modestine's in the way!" Nancy exclaimed. "Do move him. I'm sorry," she added, smiling apologetically at the owner. "We thought we'd better tether her, you see. She's generally good, but one never can be sure of her."

"I see," the owner replied gravely. "And has anyone given you permission to picnic here, may I ask?"

"We're not picnicking," she replied promptly, "we're just——" She paused at a warning glance from Billy. "Why no," she continued, "there was nobody to ask; but, you see, it was pretty and we were tired and hungry, and we don't ever do any damage when we trespass, do we?" she added, appealing to Billy and Mavis,



*"We're not picnicking," she replied promptly,
"we're just——"*

"No, and we always shut gates," Billy replied, as he opened the gate.

The gamekeeper, with a grumble all over his face, passed through without a "thank you." His companion followed, but seemed in no hurry to leave the little group.

"Isn't it rather early to be tired and hungry?" he enquired, with a puzzled glance at the remains of the meal.

"Not if you're adventurers," Nancy replied. "You see, you get too excited to eat anything before you start."

"And what exactly is an adventurer?" the owner asked, digging his stick into the ground and leaning comfortably on it. "And what does an adventurer do?"

Nancy hesitated.

"Why," she replied, looking over Riversham to the hills beyond the river, "isn't it somebody who wants to find something? Something they've wanted and wanted an' at last they feel they have to go and find it, don't they, Billy?"

"Yes," said Billy, throwing back his head, "they have to go!"

"But what do they do?" the owner repeated.

"Oh, lots of things," Billy responded eagerly. "Just anything. They don't mind what it is as long as it's part of the adventure."

"Only it mustn't be an everyday kind of thing, you know," Nancy explained.

The gamekeeper was growing impatient and was clearly in a hurry to be off. Since the children were not to be turned out he could see little use in standing there talking to them; such absurd talk, too. His master, seeing his impatience, signed to him to go, and then turned again to the children.

“ And how long do adventures last ? ” he enquired.

“ Oh, a long time,” Billy replied vaguely. He liked the stranger immensely, but he was a grown-up and—well, it was safer not to enter into details.

Now, the gamekeeper on his dismissal, instead of crossing the meadow into the lane as he had originally intended, turned back into the wood. Had he not done so; had he and his master gone straight down to Riversham as they had previously planned, the children’s adventure would have ended abruptly, and this story would never have been written.

For a car, containing a worried and unhappy father and mother was passing through the town towards Gleambridge, whither they gleaned from the children’s letter they were bound.

Up in the meadow the children could only see the chimney pots and roofs of Riversham, so they did not know that the sleepy little town was in an unusual tumult. They did not see the crowd gradually collecting round the car; they knew nothing of the enquiries that were being made, or of the relief when, at last, the shop assistant who had glanced up idly as they passed joined the crowd. Yes, three children and a

donkey had gone through the town, she said, some time ago—nearly an hour, in fact. Yes, they would soon be found for a car travels just a *little* quicker than a donkey, and the donkey seemed in no hurry.

Up in the meadow the children heard the car speeding out to the Gleambridge road, but they gave it no second thought, for the stranger was engrossing them.

“Would it,” he was asking, “be an adventure to be prosecuted for trespassing?”

His voice was grave, but Nancy’s quick eyes detected a little twitch at the corners of his mouth, and something at the back of his eyes that was not in accordance with his mouth.

“I don’t think you would prosecute us,” she replied, with a smile that was half-shy, half-frank.

“Why not? Don’t you think I ought to?”

“No, I don’t think you need. We told you we never hurt anything when we trespass. ‘Sides, I b’lieve——” She hesitated.

“Yes, what do you believe?” he encouraged her.

“I b’lieve you kind of understand.”

“Why do you think that?” he asked. In his interest he dropped all pretence of severity.

“Oh, I can’t s’plain.” Nancy regarded him frankly for a moment. “It’s something in your eyes; they’re whim—whimsical.”

“That’s a long word for a little girl,” was his reply.

“She can’t help it,” Billy interrupted with a teasing sigh and grin.

"What was the long word we were to offer up to the God of Adventure, Nancy?" Mavis asked, suddenly returning to the conversation that had been interrupted long, long ago, and joining in the general laugh when the owner hoped they were going to offer up something more substantial than a word.

"Is libation what you offer?" Nancy asked anxiously. "We weren't quite sure. And can you do it in lemonade—that's all we've got?"

"And will it matter us having eaten our meal first?" Billy enquired. "We didn't think about it till just as you came along."

"Is there *really* a God of Adventure?" Mavis chimed in eagerly. "And if we give him a libation will he really and truly help us to have lots of nice things happen?"

"Not really-truly like you and me and Billy," Nancy replied. "Is it?" she asked, turning confidentially to the owner. "But really-truly—oh, yes! Don't you remember what Aunt Letty and 'nearly-uncle Jim' told us? *Anything* can happen if you have an inner vision, and if you think there is a God of Adventure, then there *is*, and he'll help you. And, oh, do you think," she added, turning again to the stranger who yet seemed no stranger, "*do* you think we may offer him lemonade as we haven't got wine, and shall we do it now, and—and would you like to help us?"

Now, a property owner ought to be too busy attend-

ing to his duties to play with children in the young hours of the day. He ought, moreover, firmly, if politely to point out to trespassers that he cannot have his meadow turned into a sort of heathen temple. And the presumption of it! They inviting *him*, the owner to join in heathen rites! Why, he should be in a frenzy of indignation!

But the owner was twenty-one and trespassers such as these three little people, who apparently recognized him as a comrade, interested him immensely. And, curiously enough, though twenty-one is a fearfully important age and has all sorts of delightful possibilities hovering round it, Dick Frampton had an instinctive feeling that it was a privilege to be allowed to assist in, what to the children, was a solemn affair.

So, feeling that unseen hands were pushing adventure towards him, he replied by picking up the lemonade bottle and taking charge of the rites.

Yes, in the circumstances, lemonade would do, but had they salt? Sacred salt must be sprinkled on the meat. A pity they had had their meal, gods preferred their offerings to be given first. Well, they had better forget that meal and, after the offerings, they would all eat together. Had they any meat on which the salt could be sprinkled?

"There's veal and ham pie," they replied anxiously. "Will it do?"

They gathered round with silent, eager interest while he cut off a very tiny portion of the pie. Was

that enough, they asked, rather shocked to offer a god so little.

“ Yes, he’ll understand. Come now, and think hard about him and tell him inside yourselves what you want.”

With almost a feeling of being in church they followed him to the hedge and watched while he placed the corner of pie on a little grassy mound and sprinkled it with salt. With slow, solemn movements of his hands he appeared to be blessing the pie, at the same time murmuring something in a language the children could not understand.

The libation of lemonade, too, was a small one, but a God of Adventure who could not understand and forgive a shortage would not be worth approaching. An intense silence held the children as the slow drops trickled on to the mound. Modestine, a few yards off, was quietly cropping the grass ; a lazy bird-chatter came from the little wood, and across the meadow a yellowhammer was singing his bread-and-butter song. The sounds of everyday human life came up from Riversham, but faintly, so that they seemed to accentuate the silence.

Little half-thoughts that would not form themselves into words came to Nancy as they stood there. How funny that they should be standing here with this stranger. And then again, how natural it seemed—and *why* did he not seem like a stranger to them ? How wonderful the sunlight was ! How could one

think when sunlight was bathing one through and through. It caught the salt and made it alive with beauty. Surely sun-kissed salt must be acceptable to a god? Adventures now *must* come to them.

Leaving their humble offering on the mound, they, the three children and Dick Frampton, each solemnly ate a fragment of pie.

"Ours must be smaller, of course, than the sacred offering," Dick said.

What little lemonade was left he also divided between them. Nancy instinctively turned her eyes to the hills as she drank; *would* they get there, and would adventure come out to meet them, and, above all, would they know it for adventure?

"And now," said Dick, "I must go."

There was reluctance in his voice, yet he knew this was to be no final farewell; these little people had come into his life to stay—he would see to that, and seeing his own reluctance reflected in their faces, he told them his name. Just for a second Billy hesitated before he would allow Nancy to tell of their home at Nestcombe and invite Mr. Frampton to come and see them some day. Yet, after all, if they told him, what possible effect could it have on their plans?

"I'm going over there this evening," Dick said, nodding towards the hills, "so I shan't be able to come for a day or two."

"Going to the hills?" Nancy began impulsively. "Why——" A warning glance from Billy restrained

her, and Dick who simply imagined this adventure as some extra-special all-day picnic, a grand make-believe affair, had no suspicions that they would be journeying in the same direction.

With a wave of the hand he left them, and the children began to gather up their blankets and prepare to set forth again.

"I do hope we see him again soon," Nancy said, as, with a somewhat reluctant Modestine, they crossed the meadow.

That the God of Adventure, in accepting their offerings, had laid his spell on them and Dick Frampton she could not guess ; that Dick was to play a very big part in their adventures, well, how could they possibly know this ?

CHAPTER IV

MONTAGUE FRANCIS DE VERE

“**I** EXPECT there’s a lovely view just round that bend at the top,” Nancy said, when they arrived at the road. “Should we take just a peep? It won’t take five minutes.”

Billy hesitated. When he had made up his mind to go to a certain place he preferred to make steadily for it and not wander off into side roads, but as Mavis added her entreaties to Nancy’s he gave way reluctantly.

Nancy mounted Modestine and the little procession set off up the hill. To the left, they caught sight of the chimney-pots of a house, but that was all, until they reached the bend. And then such a view. A long stretch of the Gleam was visible, and the hills, rising out of a mist so faint that it seemed like a veil of light, were more alluring than ever. On their own home side of the river, far, far away beyond the mouth, were mountains peeping out from a dense blue curtain.

Mavis, the artist of the family, was enraptured by the blueness.

“It’s like that picture we saw once—you ’member—some little girls with lots of autumn leaves heaped

up, and a basket, and the blueness all behind them ! ” she cried excitedly.

“ Yes,” Nancy responded, “ an’ it was so blue I thought it couldn’t be real. Now we *know* it’s all right.”

They both sighed with delight and satisfaction.

“ I say, do look at that boy ! ” Billy interrupted. “ See, over there in the garden ! ”

The view had entirely absorbed Nancy and Mavis, but they turned with ready interest to learn the cause of that in Billy’s voice that promised something worth while.

Standing back from the road they saw the primmest house imaginable, with a garden to correspond. Not a weed was to be seen ; not a plant or bush or tree grew there that had any inclination to riot or sprawl. There were neat little rose bushes, but no ramblers ; there were stocks, and geraniums, and lobelias in prim little lozenge beds, but no pretty sprawling clarkia or love-in-a-mist or joyous Californian poppy. A neat little laurel hedge divided the flowers from the kitchen garden, where again everything was congruous—everything, that is, except the boy.

He was standing by a bed of beetroots, leaning on a hoe, with his profile towards them. They could not see his eyes, but his face, and indeed, his whole attitude, expressed solemn dejection. Yet that was not the reason why he seemed so utterly out of place in the picture.

"Isn't he dirty!" whispered Mavis, in disgust, for she had a horror of dirt, as Billy knew to his cost. "An' untidy!"

His hands, if he was supposed to be hoeing, might, of course, have been allowed a thin coating of earth, but there was earth on his face, earth on his knees, earth on his clothes. He was about Billy's age, and was wearing a grey flannel suit, grey felt hat, and grey stockings, all very much like Billy's, but, although Billy had no special reputation for either cleanliness or tidiness, he was not to be compared with the little object in the garden whose stockings were slopping over his boots, and whose hat was thrust defiantly at the back of his head.

The children stared in puzzled wonderment. There was something about him that suggested he was not just the gardener's boy, yet what possible connection could such a ragamuffin have with so prim a place?

At this moment the boy dived into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief that was the colour of his hands.

"Isn't he awful?" Mavis whispered, in horror.

"Yes, but I don't believe he's very happy," Nancy replied. "He looks so sad."

Billy giggled.

"'Spect he doesn't like hoeing!" he said. "I don't!"

Nancy shook her head.

"No, it's not that kind of sadness. I know how

you look when you have to do weeding ; his is more than that—it's *all* of him that's unhappy."

Just then the boy looked up and met Billy's eye. Neither boy moved or spoke for a moment, then suddenly the young ragamuffin jerked his hat over his eyes, thrust forward his chin, assumed a " Bill Sikes " expression, and lurched defiantly towards the palings.

" What cher want ? " he growled, in a voice that sounded volcanic.

" Nothing ! " Billy replied, with a grin. " I say, are you fed-up with hoeing ? "

The boy hesitated, a little surprised at Billy's friendly tone.

" *You'd* be," he rumbled, " if you hoed as much as I do. It's weed, weed, weed, and hoe, hoe, hoe, morning, noon, and night. A boy has no play here," he added bitterly. " *She* says a boy like me needs discipline—an' this is what she gives me ! " He paused and looked thoughtful. " 'Tisn't *his* fault," he added, as though talking to himself, " he's sorry for me, but he says it's silly to mind doin' it. Only——" and here his voice grew particularly volcanic, " I wish he wouldn't always be talkin' about courage."

" Courage ? " Billy enquired, wondering what it had to do with hoeing.

" Yes. He said there was a boy in a book who heard a man say, ' 'Tisn't life that matters, but the courage you bring to it.' I dunno what he wants to keep talkin' about it for, and I dunno what it's got to do



"I say, are you fed up with hoeing?"

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with weeding." He paused. "Courage!" he added darkly, "guess I know what courage is, as I'd show *any* boy! I don't need to weed to know *that*!"

Now, hitherto, he had not looked beyond Billy, but, at that moment, his eye fell on Mavis, who was standing with her hand on Modestine's bridle. He stood as though spellbound, with wonder in his big, solemn eyes.

"Don't stare!" Mavis said, in a reproving voice, "it's rude!"

"I'm only just lookin' at you!" he replied, in a voice that was surprisingly humble. "You're very pretty," he added. Silence again. "Would you like an apple? There's an early tree over there," he blurted out.

Mavis looked at his grubby hands.

"No, thank you," she replied promptly. Then fearing that perhaps she had hurt him, "What is your name?" she asked in a kind, fat little voice.

"Montague Francis de Vere," he replied, with a defiant eye on Billy. "*Once*," he added, reminiscently, "there was a boy who said I'd better add Plantagenet while I was about it. Montague Francis Plantagenet de Vere he called me, just that once, but *not again*!" His eye was still fixed firmly on Billy, who, instead of quailing as apparently he was intended to, merely grinned pleasantly. The ragamuffin leaned over the palings. "And there was another boy," he continued, "who called me Monty—and he was sorry afterwards!"

"Why?" asked Mavis innocently.

"'Cos I *made* him sorry!" the boy growled.

"Oh, but if I knew you I should call you Monty," Mavis replied.

"Well, *you* can—sometimes!" Montague growled. "An' so, perhaps, can *she*," with a jerk of his head towards Nancy. "But anybody else," here he again fixed Billy with a defiant eye, "anybody else has to call me Montague or Mont, else they'll be sorry."

Billy chuckled.

"Well, Mont's all right," he said. "I'll call you that."

"What does your mother call you?" asked Nancy.

"I've not got a mother," he replied simply, "nor a father."

"Oh, poor, poor Monty!" the two girls whispered kindly, and Billy sidled up to the boy in a friendly, protective way.

"Ah, now I see why you don't belong to the picture," Nancy added. "It's a horrid, prim picture and it's hurting you, isn't it?"

Montague looked up at her in surprise.

"How d'you know?" he asked. The way in which he said it told so much that their hearts ached for him.

"'Cos I kind of *feel* it about you—we said so before you turned and saw us. Who do you live with, and how long—how long have you had to live here?" She could not bring herself to ask how long he had been without a father or mother.

"Three months," he replied, in a voice that suggested that the three months had been as three centuries to him. "He's sorry for me to be here; he said he'd hoped to have had a home for Jocelyne and me with somebody who would have been a mother-person to us, but he said they couldn't agree about something or other, an' so there was no mother-person and no home—not yet."

"But who is 'he'?" asked Billy.

"My guardian," Montague replied.

"Is he nice?" asked Mavis.

"Yes, I like him—we're friends. He's going to let me live with him in London in the winter and p'raps Jocelyne, but *she* doesn't mind being here."

"Who's Jocelyne?" asked Nancy.

"She's my sister," he replied, in a resigned voice. "Sisters are not very nice people," he added bitterly. "They get grown-up and don't mind being prim, and they hate you being a bit dirty, an' it's wash, wash, wash morning, noon an' night."

"I don't like dirty people either," Mavis said. "Billy has to wash *properly*."

Billy giggled, and Montague gazed solemnly first at him and then at Mavis.

"Don't you like *me*?" he growled wistfully.

"I don't know you," Mavis replied. "P'raps I might like you if you were clean," she added kindly.

"Oh, but we do like him, Mavis! We're sorry for him, aren't we?" Nancy said impulsively.

"Yes, of course we're sorry and p'raps you'd be clean if you had a mother," Mavis replied gently. "Wouldn't you, Monty?" she added with such a winning smile in her blue eyes that Montague suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to wash and wash until he was as white as snow. Yet, though he would have given much to do so, he could not truthfully own to absolute cleanliness even under his mother's influence. He grew solemn and thoughtful once more.

"Mothers, when they're dead, try to help boys," he began. "There's a boy I know," he went on in his queer, rumbling way, "a boy what sometimes uses bad words an' his mother is an angel an' she comes to him sometimes at night looking all shiny and sorry, an' she says she'll help him not to use 'em."

"And does he manage not to now?" Nancy enquired sympathetically.

"Well, he doesn't use the *very* bad ones. Mothers," he added abruptly, "are different from aunts. *They* punish you if you use 'em." His voice grew vindictive. "When I'm grown-up I shall have a son ten years old, and he shall go without cake and jam for a month if he uses them, an' if he slides down banisters or along slippery floors, *then* he'll be sorry!"

"Oh, but aunts are nice," Mavis interrupted him. "We all love our Aunt Letty; she plays with us and tells us stories—an' she's pretty."

"Well," replied Montague, "great-aunts are different then. *They* don't ever play with you, neither are

they pretty. An' if you have boots that sound nice then they try to make you sorry about them. But," and here his brown eyes suddenly sparkled impishly, "if you've got to wear slippers downstairs you can put your boots on in your bedroom and stride up and down s'much as you like and nobody'll hear you."

"I don't think that sounds very exciting," Mavis said. "*I don't like clumsy boots.*"

Montague looked crestfallen as he gazed first at his own thick-soled boots and then at the trim little shoes Mavis was wearing.

"And is it your great-aunt you live with?" asked Nancy. "Is this her house and is that why it's so prim and neat?"

Montague nodded.

"Yes, it's hers an' she says there won't be much of it left if I'm here much longer. *I can't help it if things get in the way.* But my guardian says I've got to try and stand it a bit longer; he says he wants to study up the 'responsibilities of parenthood,' or somethin' like that. He says it's all very well to learn gradually to be a parent, but a boy of ten and a girl of fifteen, and him a bachelor of thirty he says isn't an easy situation. He says there should be lectures to meet the case. He's more afraid of Jocelyne than me 'cos women, he says, are unaccountable. He talks to *me* a lot—he likes talking. Some of it's queer kind of talk, but anyway he likes boys an' that's more'n great-aunts do. An' he plays with me."

"Our Uncle Val plays with us when he's in England, and there was another, a nearly-uncle, who used to play with us," said Mavis.

"Uncle Val's in Egypt now," Billy, who was never tired of talking of his uncle's wanderings, informed Montague. "He's been to Russia, too—he's an adventurer, and so are we!" he added proudly.

"Adventurers?" Montague repeated with interest.

"Yes, we're going to travel with a donkey. We're going to the hills over there." Billy nodded in the direction of the hills.

Montague's interest increased.

"When do you start?" he asked.

"We've started. We've come miles already, an' we're going on for days—*p'raps* a week."

Montague gazed at the three adventurers with undisguised admiration and respect.

"An' are you going on *now*?" he asked wistfully.

"Yes, an' we'd better hurry. We kind of forgot while we were talking to you. We've miles to go!" Billy was in a tremendous hurry now to be moving.

"An' me here hoeing and weedin' all the summer holidays! Me stuck in this garden with nobody to play with!" Montague's voice was so sad and his words called up so gloomy a picture that instinctively the same thought swept through each of the three children. Billy voiced it.

"I say, come with us!"

"Do come!" added Nancy.

"Yes, we'd like you to come, Monty," Mavis added sweetly, "only you will wash yourself first, won't you?"

Montague's usually solemn eyes literally danced with joy.

"I'll be ready in less'n a minute!" he cried, and dropping the hoe, he ran swiftly down the garden. A moment later, they saw him on the other side of the laurel hedge running along a path in the flower garden.

"He's going to that gold-fish pond in the middle of the lawn there! Oh, do look!" Billy chuckled in enjoyment. "If the great-aunt saw him now wouldn't her hair fly!"

Montague was kneeling on the stone edge of the pond dipping his earthy hands into the clear water. Next he pulled out the grimy handkerchief, swished it about amongst the goldfish, and smeared it over his face. Satisfied with the result, he thrust the handkerchief back into his pocket and came bounding towards them.

"Now I'm ready!" he cried joyfully. "Let's start!"

Mavis eyed him critically.

"Oh, you awful, awful boy," she sighed. "You're worse than before. You *can't* come like that."

Montague sighed, too.

"You're never pleased with me," he rumbled unhappily, "an' *I* think you're so pretty."

Mavis felt a little ashamed. She thought a moment.

"Here, quick," she said, pulling out her own dainty little handkerchief. "Run and dip that in the pond and bring it to me. *I'll* wash your face."

Montague hesitated miserably. Washing was bad enough in itself, but could he possibly submit to the terrible indignity of being washed by a girl—even if she did happen to be the prettiest little girl he had ever seen. Was it, after all, worth while?

“Hurry, Monty, there’s a good boy, else somebody may come and stop us,” Mavis said anxiously.

The adorable motherliness behind the anxiety half decided Montague. He glared hard at Billy, defying him to laugh.

“*I’ve* been through it,” Billy sighed, with his happy grin. “Girls are tyrants—specially sisters!”

Montague, with a mixture of defiance and subjection in his walk, returned to the pond, dipped the tiny handkerchief in the water and brought it back to Mavis.

“I won’t hurt you,” she said kindly, as she wiped away the water-marks.

Not hurt him? Montague writhed inwardly under the hurt to his pride. Why he submitted he hardly knew; certainly, it was the last thing he would have imagined himself doing.

“Why, you’re quite nice-looking now you’re clean!” Mavis said, surveying her handiwork with pride. “Run an’ wash my handky quick—then we’re ready.”

Montague departed with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes.

“She said I’m nice-looking!” he told himself joyfully as he flew to the pond. Why, it was almost worth while to be clean after all.

CHAPTER V

THE OTHER SIDE

THE little procession, with its reinforcement, set off down the hill. Mavis, who was still dissatisfied with Montague's appearance, made him take off his coat and shake it as they went along. If she had not been so fascinatingly pretty and if there had not been that irresistible motherliness in her voice, Montague would have been inclined to class her with Jocelyne.

"But Jocelyne *she* wouldn't go on an adventure," he told himself. "She'd want to go in a car and stop at swanky hotels."

For there were to be no hotels, the children informed him. There would be sleeping out of doors, or perhaps sometimes in a cottage if it was wet.

"An' there ought," they told him, "to be a monastery 'cos Stevenson slept at one one night."

They had turned now into the Gleambridge road.

"Why are we going this way?" Montague asked suddenly.

"We told you. We're going to the hills, we want to see the other side of them. And we've got to go to Gleambridge first, you know, to get there."

"Gleambridge!" Montague repeated slowly. "Then I can't come!"

He stood in the middle of the road, disappointment written all over him.

"Why not?" they asked, in surprise.

"'Cos my two crosses are there," he replied bitterly.

"Your two crosses?"

"Yes, Jocelyne an' Aunt. They've gone by car, an' we'd be sure to meet them an' they'd bring me back."

The children understood at once; they did not like the thought of the poor boy turning back or being brought back ignominiously by his aunt, yet what were they to do?

"We can't swim the river with a donkey and blankets and things," Billy said. "'Course there's the ferry, but the ferryman, well, he *might* not want to take us, or he *might* ask questions—and it'd be the end of everything."

Montague thought a moment.

"We *could* go by the ferry-boat," he said. "He's up in the forest to-day, I know, 'cos Jim Virgo—he's his son an' a *great* friend of mine—he told me he'll have charge of the boat all day, an' if I could slip away for a bit I could have a ride in it, he said. I was just thinking of going when you came. Aunt and Jocelyne," he added with a chuckle, "they don't like me talking to the village people, but my guardian he says I can if I like."

The children considered hard. Should they venture? Would it be too great a risk? Nancy's eyes sparkled and she suddenly felt queer inside. Think of it; the hills *to-day*!

"Oh, let's chance it, Billy!" she cried.

They had already passed the turning that led down to the river, and it meant going back a little, but what did that matter when perhaps some time to-day they would be in the heart of the hills?

The river road was deserted, but they hurried somewhat nervously along it, for the Riversham gardens sloped down to it and people *might* appear.

"You'd better go first, Mont," Billy said, "and see if the coast is clear. Wave to us if Jim Virgo is there alone. We won't risk it if his father's there."

Montague ran down to the riverside and the children waited breathlessly. In a moment, however, they saw a hand waving violently, and with hope high in their hearts, they reached the ferry. Jim Virgo, a fair-haired youth who was sucking a straw, greeted them with a sheepish grin.

"I've told him it's a secret an' he's promised not to tell," Montague announced.

Nancy slipped off Modestine and led her to the wide ferry-boat. Modestine, however, did not like the look of it and planted herself firmly on the bank.

Nancy pleaded with her and Jim Virgo stepped forward to take her bridle.

Modestine glanced at him, saw that he was wearing

corduroy trousers—for some unexplainable reason she objected strongly to them—and immediately sat down on the bank, assuming her most angelic expression.

Billy, for a moment, abused her angrily, then his usually sunny face cleared.

“I expect,” he said, “this is one of the not-nice things adventurers have to put up with.”

Suddenly, Montague, pulling his hat down over his eyes, lurched up to Modestine and, planting himself in front of her, regarded her with a most diabolical expression.

“You donkey, you, just you get up or I’ll have yer life!” he muttered hoarsely. “D’yer want to *die*, minion, eh?” he added, thrusting his face close to Modestine’s.

For one brief second Modestine regarded him in angelic surprise, then, rising hastily, walked demurely towards the boat.

The children, shaking with laughter, followed, and Billy and Nancy ran forward and led her on to the boat. Jim Virgo followed, and, a moment later, there was the swish of oars being dipped into the water, and the boat was heading for the opposite bank.

“Hurrah!” cried Billy. “We’ve started; we’re really on our way to the hills now! Isn’t it ripping?”

Nancy for reply, took hold of a tiny portion of Mavis’ dress and twisted it in her fingers. “A Nancy-spasm,” the proceeding was known as, in the family, a spasm that told of a turmoil within that small person.



The boat was heading for the opposite bank.

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In such a little while now they would have crossed the broad river. How lovely it looked to-day, what a pity to be leaving it behind. What a dear river it was, almost like a friend. Hadn't the sound of it been in their ears and hearts all their lives ; was it absurd to fancy that a little bit of it had got into themselves—some of its restlessness. And there would be water where they were going ? There must be. Not even the hills could be perfect for Nancy if there was not the sound of water murmuring either big or little talk, it scarcely mattered which, somewhere in their midst.

How near they were getting. Oh, this excitement made you feel almost sick ! Just a thin strip of water—now a bump ! They were there !

Montague was the only person, when they had bidden good-bye to Jim Virgo, who did not realize the solemnity of the moment.

“ Well, we're here ! ” they said simply, and nobody could think of anything else to say.

That they felt just a little small and lonely with the broad Gleam dividing them from home and all the familiar home places not one of them would admit. It was so wonderful to be here, just at the foot of the hills. Curious how far away it made yesterday seem, yesterday and all the other yesterdays with their little everyday happenings. How important those happenings had seemed at the time and now how small they seemed ! Nancy had a curious feeling that something bigger than just half a day had grown up between them

and the present moment. Nothing certainly had happened yet, no adventure had come; there had simply been the meeting with Mr. Frampton and the finding of Montague, nevertheless she felt, now they had really crossed the river, that they were not quite the same children they were yesterday.

And now that they were at the foot of the hills, adventure might begin at any moment. They discussed it as they tramped up a pretty lane leading from the river. What would it be like? Lions and tigers, Montague thought, but was promptly squashed by Billy. Lions and tigers in England! Lions and tigers belonging to a travelling circus, Montague explained doggedly. He *wanted* it to be something in the wild animal line so that he could have the joy of rescuing Mavis, and to be able to shine in her eyes.

At the end of the lane they came suddenly upon the village of Hampton. A few houses and a shop or two were scattered on either side of a long, wide green.

They eyed it dubiously.

"At Nestley," Mavis said, "all the houses snuggle together, don't they. *This* isn't very cosy, is it?"

Somehow, it seemed impossible that anybody could love so wide a village, such an apart kind of village. Never had they seen so large a green.

"But *I* have," Montague informed them. "Near us in Suffolk there was ever such a long green with *crowds* of huge trees on it. I like it better'n this," he added.

But after all, the village did not matter ; they must decide which road to take. Which road would lead them quickest to the hills ? A signpost a little further on pointed to the left for Gleambridge, and they decided to take it till they should find one branching off up to the hills.

Nancy, who was rested now, wanted Mavis to ride again, but the child was not yet tired and insisted on Nancy riding a little further.

Montague, trudging along by Mavis, felt extraordinarily happy, happier than he had been for the last three months. Something inside him seemed to be expanding ; feelings he could not understand surged up within him, feelings that had been dead, or dormant for a long time. Long, long ago, when there had been a mother to be loved and protected he had felt like this ; when it had been his happy privilege to wait on her and attend to her wants. To bring her cushions, to sit on a little stool at her feet, why, yes, this queer feeling had often come to him then. And again when his father had been home, just before he died—but three long, desolate, empty months lay between him and those happy days when someone had been glad of his service ; three months brightened only by flying visits from a guardian who, if one saw more of him, one might learn to love ; three months of rebellion against discipline ; three months' loathing of a primness that shouted in every corner. And, so long are three months in the life of a small boy, that in even less than that

time in such an atmosphere, feeling that he is uncared for, the finer instincts in him will shrink and shrivel ; he will become a little animal caring for nobody.

And now he was tramping along, unrestricted, with three children who liked him, whom he liked.

" I could carry you if you're tired ! " he growled suddenly to Mavis. " I'm strong. Will you let me ? "

Mavis shook her head with a smile.

" No, thank you, Monty, I'll walk, " she replied with decision. " You're not *much* bigger'n me either. "

" I'm ten ! " he replied proudly.

" An' I'm seven, an' I can walk a long way. At Nestcombe we always walk lots. "

" Presently you'll be tired, " he suggested hopefully.

" Then I can ride Modestine. Nancy said I could. "

Poor Montague with this strange desire to serve and guard, and Mavis would have none of it !

Presently he spoke again.

" Could I hold your hand if you're just a *little* tired, but not tired enough to ride ? It 'ud help you along. "

Mavis looked at his hand. It was rather grubby still in between the fingers, but, somehow, in spite of the dirt, she had a motherly feeling towards her unkempt companion. Poor boy, he had no mother. Well, she would let him hold her hand just a little way, though she hoped there would be a brook presently where she could free herself from any dirt that might find its way from Montague's hand to hers.

Montague took the little hand reverently into his

grubby paw. What a tiny hand it was and what a pretty shape. His mother's, he remembered, had been pretty and so very white. Mavis's was tanned, but it was a clean tan. Yes, after all, it was nice for girls to have clean hands. How warm the little fingers were, not a sticky warmth, but something that seemed to come from inside the child, a warmth that seemed to speak of friendliness and confidence. Montague's frozen young heart that had been gradually expanding under the influence of happy comradeship simply thrilled at the human contact. Yet he marvelled at himself. Imagine him, Montague, until to-day liking to hold anybody's hand! How he would have wriggled if the hand had been Jocelyne's—but then, Jocelyne thought him a terror and a nuisance, and Mavis, though she might not admire him as he would like to have been admired by her, was kind to him. Just how much this friendship was meaning to him none of the children, not even Nancy with her quick intuition, could understand. How should they when life had held nothing so far but sheltering love for them?

Montague's thoughts strayed to his aunt and Jocelyne in Gleambridge. They had left him at home because he was not an altogether desirable person to take shopping, they considered. Montague, remembering a shopping expedition with Jocelyne, suddenly chuckled wickedly.

“What's the joke?” Billy enquired.

"Nothin' really. Only I was thinking Aunt and Jocelyne wouldn't have been pleased to see me if we had gone to Gleambridge."

"Why not?" Mavis enquired.

"Oh, only 'cos something happened there once." Again he chuckled with impish enjoyment.

"Do tell us about it, Monty!" Nancy pleaded. The road was flat and not very interesting, and the turning up to the hills seemed a long time coming, and Nancy was ready for any distraction from the straightness of the road.

"There isn't much to tell, only Jocelyne and me and some of her friends went to Gleambridge. Stupid, giggling things those girls were, an' Jocelyne was sillier than any of them."

"Why? What did she do?" Mavis asked.

"Oh, I dunno. She talked silly—an' she's a proud thing, too!"

"Proud?"

"Yes. I met a great friend of mine—he's the blacksmith's son, and once he gave me a horseshoe, and sometimes he lets me help blow the bellows, and him and me were talking at the station and Jocelyne said I shouldn't talk to a village boy."

"Not talk to village boys!" Billy repeated. "Why we know everybody in our village. Jimmy Petherham, old Daddy Petherham's grandson, and I, often go fishing together."

"Well, you're luckier'n me," Montague replied

bitterly. "I mustn't talk to any of them—but I do," he added, with a grin.

"An' *then* what happened?" Mavis prompted.

"Oh, nothing 'cept I'd forgot to put my garters on, and Jocelyne got cross and said I'd disgrace her and her friends."

"Well, *I* think sloppy socks or stockings are ugly," Mavis said.

"*Do* you?" Montague looked at her in a troubled way. Was she going to side with Jocelyne always? And yet—no—there was something so different in the way this little person said things. It was as though she really cared about you being clean and tidy, not as though she said the things to hurt you.

Billy, however, grinned sympathetically.

"Garters get lost, don't they?" he chuckled.

"Yes, they do," Montague growled. "An' sometimes you want to use them for other things—same as you do handkerchiefs." He paused. "It's not *your* fault," he continued, "if you're made to get ready all in a hurry an' you've been using your handkerchief just before to collect worms in for chickens, an' *you* can't help it if you put it in your pocket and forget all about it and when you are in the train and you want to use it and earth and worms tumble on the floor."

Billy roared with laughter, but the girls were horrified.

"No wonder Jocelyne got cross!" they said.

"She didn't, not then," Montague replied. "I thought she meant to, but her friends, they just giggled and giggled, and she giggled, too—only a lady in the corner with glasses on a stick an' me didn't laugh. *We* thought them all silly, I can tell you! An' then in Gleambridge—well, *I* wouldn't have giggled like that in a town."

"Why did they giggle there?" Mavis enquired.

"Well, first," Montague replied, "Jocelyne was cross. She tried to hold my hand 'cos she didn't like the way I walked—I think it a nice way."

"Was it like when we first saw you?" Mavis asked. "I 'spect it was," she added, with a sigh.

"Me and the blacksmith's son *like* to walk like that," Montague muttered, "sometimes, anyway," he added, realizing that a lurching gait at the present moment would mean the withdrawal of the small hand he still held. "Then they went into the china shop," he continued, "and Jocelyne said I must stay outside, an' some of 'em said silly things about bulls and china shops, an' then I got tired an' so I just sat down on the pavement and went to sleep. And that was all," he ended abruptly.

"S'pose you got into hot-water for that?" Billy enquired sympathetically.

"No, I didn't—but they talked sillier than ever. If you'd *seen* them all standing round me giggling and giggling and 'tracting everybody's attention you'd have been ashamed, *I* can tell you. *I* was! An' the

stupid things they said, too! Straws and camels' backs they talked about—I didn't know what they meant. *You* wouldn't like being in Gleambridge with Jocelyne," he finished bitterly.

"I don't think I should," Billy agreed.

"Perhaps she's a little bit nice," Nancy suggested hopefully.

"I don't think so," Montague replied emphatically.

"My guardian he says there are possibilities in Jocelyne—or something like that. He says I can't see them yet, but I may later on—but I don't think I shall."

"I say, look! We're coming to a turning to the right," Billy cried excitedly, and even Montague caught the excitement, and forgetting Jocelyne, quickened his pace towards the road that should lead them up into the hills.

In a very little while the turning was reached, and they looked eagerly for the beginning of the hills. The road, however, was perfectly flat, and the hills, for they could see them quite plainly, were still some way off. Billy suddenly stopped dead in the middle of the road.

"Why, we've got the canal to cross—it's *this* side of the river, so we've a long way to go yet. Let's hope there will be a bridge across it, else we're done for to-day."

A little disappointed that they had forgotten the Gleambridge Canal and that the hills were still some way off, they hurried along. The road was hot and

dusty, but soon they came to the canal, and, to their great relief, found that there was a bridge across it. At any other time they would have lingered, for the canal was nearly as pretty as a river, and water, almost any water, fascinated them. They paused only to watch the canal-man catch a packet of letters that someone threw from a passing steamer—a most extraordinary kind of post, they thought, and worth pausing for, because it was something they had never witnessed before.

And presently the road really began to rise, but so gradually that they did not at first realize that the hills were beginning at last. There were curves too, now, and great shady trees and walls splashed all over with crimson Herb Robert—low, inviting walls.

“We have hedges at home in Suffolk,” Montague said, as he stared in surprise at the huge slabs of white stone piled on the top of each other.

“So do we in the forest,” Billy said, “but Dad has told us about these walls. He said they kind of belong here and are part of the picture because they are hill stones.”

They had to stand on the wall and peep through the trees.

“Why! There’s our forest over there across the river!” Nancy exclaimed. “Isn’t it funny to look at it from this side?”

The thought struck her that if it had not been their home forest they would have wanted to go straightway

and explore it—it looked so beautiful from here, so different somehow. How grand and noble it was! Such lovely lights there were on the trees—and the coolness! Nancy could almost feel it. Yet how stupid, she thought, pulling herself together, to be lingering here gazing at a place one could visit any day in the year, when at last they were beginning to touch the hills.

Montague, too, was fascinated by the forest. At Riversham, though he lived on the fringe of it, he had never been actually in it, and in Suffolk, he explained there were only woods, not forests.

“We’ll take you there when we go back,” Billy said. “We know some ripping places for playing Robin Hood.”

“When we go back!”

All the joy went out of Montague’s life when he thought of returning to Riversham. *Need* they go back?

“Why, of course!” Mavis replied. “There’s Muvee and Daddy and Aunt Letty.” Then noticing his miserable face, “But there’ll be us now for you to play with,” she added kindly.

Mavis scrambled down from the wall, but rejected Montague’s hand. The road with its pretty banks and walls was offering such lovely surprises in flowers and ferns that she wanted to be free to dart hither and thither like a joyous little butterfly.

“I could run, too,” Montague grumbled.

“But not as quick as me, Monty, dear,” she replied

lightly, dancing swiftly along in front of the others. Presently she stopped and beckoned excitedly ; they found her kneeling by the roadside drinking, with her hands for a cup, from a little stream that gushed from the bank.

"It's icy cold!" she gasped. "Come and drink and bathe your faces."

Modestine, of course, had to share in the happy find and very unwillingly she left the refreshing stream when the children were ready to take the road again. To rest her, Nancy led her up the hill and she ambled sulkily along, not appreciating the delights of the way that spurred the happy children on.

Presently they came to a high road running along the top. There was nothing particularly attractive about it, and a long belt of trees shut out the real hills, but behind them they could still see the river and forest and far away the blue mountains.

"I'm just dying with hunger," Billy announced. "I vote we have dinner here."

It was past one o'clock by Mavis's watch so, as the others were equally hungry, they decided to camp on a stretch of green near the belt of trees.

They unpacked the basket and remembered they had nothing to drink. How foolish not to have filled their bottle at the stream. However, in the distance was a farm, and the boys volunteered to go and beg some water, while the girls tethered Modestine and cut the bread and the pie.

In a very short time they returned with a bottle of milk which the farmer's wife had pressed on them, refusing any payment.

"They've got a cider-press there," Montague announced when they were all deep in veal and ham pie.

"He says he's never seen one before," Billy explained.

Not seen a cider-press? How strange! Well, they would certainly have to take him to see one working when the apples were ready.

"An' he says he's never been in a fishing-boat," Billy said, helping himself to a second slice of pie.

"Not been in a fishing-boat!" Nancy exclaimed. "Oh, you must come with us and Aunt Letty in Daddy Petherham's boat."

"Need the aunt come?" Montague enquired doubtfully.

"Why, yes, of course! You'll love Aunt Letty—she helps us 'make-believe.'"

Montague said nothing, but so intense was his dislike even of the word "aunt" that he found it impossible to work up any enthusiasm even for an Aunt Letty.

"And have you ever been shrimping, Monty?" Mavis asked.

He confessed that he had not.

The three children sat and looked at him in wonder. What kind of a place was this Suffolk he was always talking about? Was it a kind of foreign country?

All the everyday things that seemed actually a part of their existence were unknown to Montague. They began to feel almost eager for the day that would see them back at Nestcombe, when they could introduce him to everything and everybody. People, places, and things suddenly took on a new interest in the thought of showing them to someone who knew nothing about them. Almost a pity it could not be to-day—but how absurd; fancy even *thinking* of home-places when you were on the fringe of the land of your dreams. All the same, it was strange how sometimes you wanted to be in two places at once. So troublesome, they sighed.

Montague, for his part, was feeling rather ashamed of his ignorance of everything that seemed so much a matter of course with his companions. Was there nothing he could tell them of Suffolk that they would find attractive? He remembered Mavis's delight in flowers.

"I've seen flax growing," he began hopefully. "It's like a field of blue sky, and afterwards it's silky like Mavis's hair, only not so goldy."

"Have you seen them cutting it?" Billy asked with interest.

Now was Montague's turn to score.

"They *pull* it!" he replied, feeling big.

They must know more about this Suffolk of his, they said. What else had they there? Well, there was the moat round their house with water-lilies

growing in it, and he and Jocelyne had had a little canoe on it. And in the next village there was a house as big as a castle, *lots* of turrets and towers, and a *huge* moat and probably dungeons. As to the dungeons, Montague was drawing on his imagination, but he need not have done, for Suffolk, though so different from their home-places sounded romantic, the children agreed—almost like a story-book place.

Somehow, after the meal was finished nobody seemed inclined to move. After all, why hurry now, why not rest awhile, why not give one's self up for a moment to the drowsiness of the afternoon? Such a stillness there was in the air, such a fragrance, too, from all the sweet things that were tucked away in the short hill grass, such a musical murmur from myriads of unseen insects. How the heat and music and fragrance seemed to grow into each other out here on the hill top, how pleasant to close one's eyes——

In a little while four tired children were asleep. Modestine, cropping the grass near by, saw that stillness had come upon her talkative companions. There was loneliness in the silence, the grass lost its savour for her; better, she thought, get a little nearer to them, if the rope would allow it, and sleep, too. Very daintily she stepped amongst them and stood with Mavis between her legs. Ah, this was better than cropping grass alone. Modestine blinked a little, nodded, and then she, too, became part of the sleeping afternoon.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRIOR

THE afternoon was well advanced when the children awoke. Montague was horrified to see Modestine standing over Mavis, but the child merely laughed and stretched a lazy hand to tickle Modestine's nose.

"She likes to be near us," she explained. "'Sides, she feels she had to look after us, you see."

Montague thought it a somewhat dangerous way of looking after anybody, but nobody else seemed to agree with him.

Once again they set out, Mavis riding. For a mile or so the road stretched along the top of the low ridge, then it began to descend inland. The belt of trees was no longer there to hide the view, and hills and valleys, sometimes wooded, sometimes with houses scattered about them, were revealed to their delighted eyes. Near the foot of the ridge they were descending, they could see a small village.

"We can buy something to eat there," said Nancy, "and I *think* we'll see if there's a nice cottage to stay at—just for the first night," she added apologetically.

For, somehow, the long rest in the afternoon did not seem to have been enough, and a comfortable bed

seemed more inviting than the hard ground. Such a pity one had to get tired, such a trial that one's body would not let one do as much as one would like to do.

There were so many twists and curves in the road that they found the village was much further off than they had imagined. It was a pretty road, prettier even than the road that had so delighted them in the morning, and always now there were the great shoulders of the higher hills beckoning them. Yet, somehow, prettiness did not seem as important as it had done earlier in the day—even the hills were beginning to lose a little of their charm. Sleep and a clean white bed for to-night, and to-morrow a re-awakened enthusiasm.

At last they drew near the village. At the entrance was a huge saw-mill, and beyond it a few cottages and one small general shop. Here they bought their bread and butter.

The woman who served them looked at them curiously, but she asked no questions. They hesitated whether to enquire here about sleeping accommodation.

“Does—where does that road opposite lead to, please?” Nancy asked.

“That? Oh, that's just a private road to the Priory,” the woman replied.

“The Priory!”

The children looked at each other and hurried out of the shop.

A Priory ! Why, surely, this was the very place for them to seek a night's rest at. A monastery, of course, would have been the correct thing, but a Priory surely would do.

"Let's go and enquire," Nancy said. "I don't s'pose monks or priors would charge very much."

They hurried eagerly up the road, and very soon saw in front of them a pair of huge iron gates, and through some tall beech trees, the chimney-pots of the Priory. The Priory itself was hidden by a high wall, and until they reached the gates they were unable to see it.

They stood with their faces pressed against the gates, staring with admiration, mingled with nervousness. It was the most beautiful building they had ever seen—except the cathedral—the windows and the great front door looked, they thought, as though they belonged to a church. But it was so large, almost as large, Montague admitted, as the place with the turrets in Suffolk. Would it be *too* bold to seek a lodging here ? No monks or priors were to be seen—were they all at their prayers ? If only the place were not quite so imposing, if it were not so silent, if a monk would only appear !

"There's a man !" whispered Montague. "Over there, across the lawn."

The others looked and saw an elderly man coming up a little winding path beyond a lawn in front of the house. They studied him anxiously. They were a

little surprised that he was not wearing the kind of dressing-gown affair that they supposed monks usually wore. Perhaps, however, he was the prior and could dress as he liked. And *if* he was the prior could they summon up courage to speak to him? Nancy noticed that his beard was soft and curly, and that he was bronzed; but what attracted her were his eyes.

"They're like two brown fires," she thought, "dancing fires."

His walk, too, re-assured her. It was so intensely alive, so young.

"He's kind," Nancy whispered, "I'll go and speak to him."

But the sharp eyes had already found the little group at the gates. For just one second their owner hesitated, then, with eager interest he darted towards them.

"Don't forget to raise your hat, Billy," Nancy reminded him hastily.

"You, too, Monty," Mavis whispered. For a moment Montague felt rebellious at the idea of raising his hat to a man, it was bad enough to have to do it to women; but when a little person *trusts* you to do a thing, well, you simply have to give in.

The man opened the gates, and, to Montague's amazement, raised his hat as courteously as though they had been grown-ups in a car instead of four travel-stained children with a donkey.

"You are wanting something? Tell me!" His

voice and smile were so encouraging that immediately they felt at their ease.

Nancy was the spokesman.

"Please, we are travellers," she explained, "an' we are too tired to sleep out of doors to-night, and we were going to look for a nice cottage, but a Priory is better. It *should* be a monastery really, but we thought a Priory would be about the same. And so *could* you let us be boarders, do you think? We're quite respectable—it's only travelling that's made us a little untidy."

At first the stranger looked a little astonished, then a kind of waiting-to-hear-what-would-come-next expression settled on his face.

"How long would you want to stay?" he enquired.

"Oh, only one night, 'cos we're going on again to-morrow—we haven't time to stay long in one place." She hesitated. She wanted to enquire how much they would have to pay, yet somehow it seemed difficult to mention money to this distinguished-looking man. *Would* he understand that if you're only children you could not afford to stay at expensive places? "Could you—would you mind telling me what the charge is, please?" she faltered, flushing a little. "We should only just want some tea and a bed, and we'd be leaving before breakfast 'cos we've really got our tea in the basket, but it can be breakfast instead."

The Prior, if he was the prior, made a wide, sweeping

gesture as though to push their breakfast-basket miles away.

"No visitor leaves the Priory without breakfast," he said emphatically. "It's one of the rules and can't be broken. Can you obey rules?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes, sir," Billy replied, not without some inward trepidation. The rules at a Priory might be terribly severe.

"Good. Well then, all visitors are requested to retire at seven o'clock and to attend matins behind the nuns' screen at 8.45 the following morning. After matins a collection will be taken and each visitor is expected to put in the bag exactly the amount he or she would put in the offertory bag on Sundays at home. *Exactly*, mind—neither more nor less."

The children breathed freely when the Prior got to the end of the rules. After all, there was nothing terrible for them to do. They *might* have had to sleep on stone floors or rise in the middle of the night for prayers. Nevertheless, one of the rules troubled Nancy, and she spoke of it to the Prior. Did he know, she enquired, that children only put a *little* money in the offertory bag? Should they put what they would give at Harvest Festival?

The Prior shook an admonishing finger at her.

"Not a penny more or a penny less than the usual Sunday offering," he said. "That is the rule."

His voice certainly was stern, but the children were not in the least afraid of him, for he beamed kindness

upon them and Nancy was sure she saw flashes of fun in his eyes.

"But what about Modestine? What shall we give for her?" Billy enquired.

"Modestine! Modestine!" The Prior's quick eyes searched the children's anxious, upturned faces. Then he laughed. "Capital—capital!" he cried. "A donkey with so classical a name must receive free board and lodging. It is an honour to have her under one's roof—or rather one's stable-roof. I take off my hat to Modestine!" With that he took off his hat and made the little animal a sweeping bow. Modestine was unimpressed, but the children were delighted. "And now," continued the Prior, "come, my dears. There's a good woman here of the name of White, into whose hands I will put you to have those travel-stains (he looked whimsically at the earth that still clung to Montague's knickers) removed. And then for tea!"

"Oh, but can we just see to Modestine before we wash?" Billy asked. "She's dreadfully thirsty, and we must rub her down and give her a feed."

"Don't worry about Modestine, my boy," said the Prior. "There's a man of the name of Monk hanging about the stables with nothing particular to do. Time will hang less heavily on his hands with Modestine to occupy it."

"But would he do it properly?" Nancy enquired anxiously.

"Have no fears, my dear," said the Prior. "Monk has had a good deal of experience of donkeys in Egypt."

"Well," Billy replied, "if he finds he can't manage her I'll come and help him. It all depends on her mood, you see."

"Exactly. I'll tell Monk what you say. Ah, there he is. I'll take Modestine to him. Wait here one moment."

Modestine suffered herself to be led away, though nothing would induce her to allow the Prior to indulge in his quick, eager stride.

The children looked at the man called Monk with interest. So that was a monk. He looked quite ordinary; he was even wearing ordinary clothes, but perhaps, they decided, they were allowed not to wear a robe when they were working.

The Prior came dashing back across the lawn to them.

"Now, my children, come!" He held out a hand to each of the girls, and with confidence they took it. The boys followed.

"Does he wear his gown when he tells his beads?" Mavis enquired.

"Who?" For just the fraction of a second there was bewilderment in the Prior's eyes, but it quickly vanished. "Probably, my child," he replied.

"But don't you *know*?" Nancy asked. "Aren't you the head of the Priory, and don't they have to do what you tell them?"

The Prior laughed.

"Oh, yes, I'm the head of the place," he replied. "But I'm not a very strict person. I allow them all a certain amount of freedom. Freedom is good for the soul, you know. It helps it to expand—restriction contracts."

The children did not quite understand, but they thought it sounded nice.

"*I* should like to be a monk here," Montague rumbled. "*I'd* like freedom—if Mavis and the others could be here, too," he added.

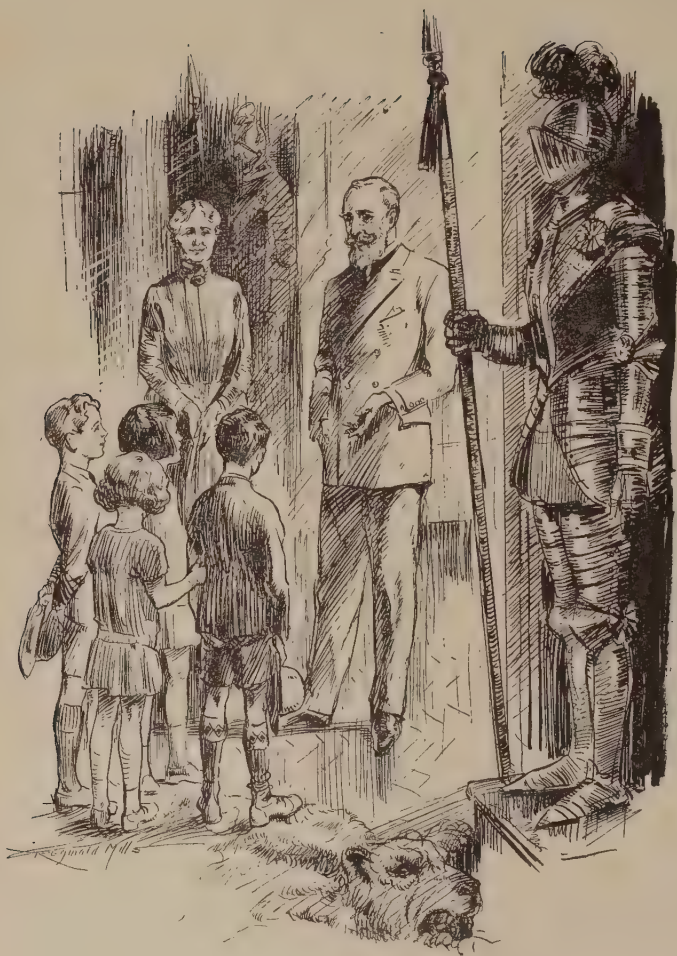
The Prior pricked up his ears at the volcanic note in Montague's voice, and, pausing, turned to look at the boy. What he saw in the love-starved face hurt him. He dropped Nancy's hand and waved his own impetuously as though to push something painful away.

"Restriction and starvation of soul written all over the boy," he thought indignantly. Aloud he said, "You shall all live here for ever if you like," and the smile he gave Montague warmed the boy's heart towards him.

"I'm glad Mavis made me raise my hat to him," he thought.

Ah, but, Nancy said in reply to the Prior, though they would love him there were other people they loved, too—people who wanted them.

"There's nobody wants me at Riversham," Montague growled, "and nobody *I* want—'cept when my Guardian comes—so *I* could stay here."



Presently he returned with a grand person in a rustling silk dress.

They had reached the house now, and the Prior pushed open the great door, the most beautiful door they had ever seen. The children, with thrills of excitement running through them, followed him into a vast hall. Now, all four of them, Montague in his Suffolk home, the others in their dear old Nestcombe home were used to spacious, beautiful halls, yet, large though they were, both of them could have been put inside the one they had entered. It was paved with great slabs of stone, and the rugs and skins that were scattered about in profusion looked like little islands. A carriage might easily have been driven up the wide staircase, which wound its way to a gallery above; a beautiful staircase it was, too, with its carvings of the heads of many different saints. In a distant corner of the hall was some armour, and all the walls were hung with portraits—dozens of them, every period for centuries back being represented. Nancy thought they looked like ancestors, yet she was puzzled to find them here in a Priory, expecting rather that there would have been only madonnas and other sacred pictures.

The Prior had gone in search of Mrs. White, and presently he returned with a grand person in a rustling silk dress. He introduced her to them.

“And now,” he said, “I am going to hand these little people over to you, Mrs. White. Just a little cleansing and brushing, you know—then tea on the lawn.”

"Very good, sir," Mrs. White replied.

"Oh, and Mrs. White, will you see that Master Lionel's room is ready by seven o'clock? Put another small bed in there. The boys will like to share a room, I'm sure. And for the little girls——" He hesitated and his eyes swept the two little faces turned expectantly towards him, "prepare Miss Dorothy's room."

Mrs. White knew her master thoroughly. Nothing that he did, as a rule, surprised her, but at the mention of "Miss Dorothy's room" her surprise was visible. "Miss Dorothy's room," that had not been slept in since the "blessed lamb" had become an angel! Surely these little girls were very special friends of her master, for such a thing to happen. However, she pulled herself together, and assuring her master that everything should be as he wished, conducted the children upstairs.

Who, the children wondered as they followed Mrs. White, were Lionel and Dorothy? Were they the Prior's children? But *did* priors marry? And why was he here alone, and why did they not see more monks?

What a huge, huge house this was; how easily one could get lost here—what a ripping place for hide-and-seek! Ah, here were the pictures that should have been in the hall; saints and madonnas and holy families, all of them wearing the shiny plates round their heads that people called "halos." What

lots of them, and what a lovely picture gallery, and what delightful window-seats. Nancy simply had to stop to scramble into one of them and gaze at the view of the hills. If they were beautiful seen from outside, how much more so looking through these wonderful mullioned windows that seemed to radiate green and gold lights. A feeling of worship swept over Nancy's impressionable young soul; depths that, so far, only the sound of the organ at the cathedral had touched, were stirred. But Mrs. White was waiting and she must follow.

The boys were left at a huge bathroom, and Mrs. White conducted Nancy and Mavis to her own room—a room that surely was made for no other person than Mrs. White, for everything about it was just as neat and sedate and unsurprised-looking as Mrs. White herself. Hats and hair ribbons must not be flung about here!

After supplying them with towels and hot water she left them for a few moments. They hoped she would not be long away, for the big, silent place somewhat overawed them. Such lots and lots of doors they had passed. Were they the cells, Mavis wondered; was a monk praying silently in each, and weren't they themselves going to sleep in cells? It seemed not, from what the Prior had said, yet *were* there ordinary rooms in a priory?

"I can't make things out a bit," Nancy replied. "It doesn't seem nice to ask lots of questions

when you're kind of guests, but I *would* like to know about Dorothy. D'you s'pose she's a nun? P'raps she's at another priory or convent now."

"Couldn't we ask just that?"

"No, I think not, but p'raps we'll find out later. Let's wait and see, 'cos, after all, it's awfully exciting, isn't it? We don't know *what* will happen next! An' if we don't see the monks to-night we shall *have* to see them at matins to-morrow."

Two perfectly clean and tidy little girls awaited Mrs. White on her return. At the bathroom they picked up two passably clean boys, and Mrs. White led the whole party to the Prior, who was awaiting them under a great beech tree of beautiful proportions on the lawn.

"And now for tea!" said the Prior, beaming on the children. "A good substantial tea for hungry travellers."

He led them to a tea-table that was heaped with good things. A tall and solemn-looking man was hovering near it.

"That's all, Monk, thank you. We'll manage alone to-day, eh, children?"

Another monk, they thought with interest, as they gathered round the table, and again an ungowned one! Well, of course, the Vicar did not wear his cassock in private life; perhaps the same rule applied to monks. Yet why was there a kind of twinkle in the Prior's eyes when they questioned him as to why

he called each one "Monk" and not "Brother so-and-so"? And why did he evade the question?

The tea was a delightful one. Chicken in aspic, cold ham, honey, and scones. "Grown-up" cake, too, with lots of currants in it, and raspberries and cream. Each of them you may be sure did ample justice to it. The Prior insisted that Nancy should act as hostess. The honour of it! To pour out with a grown-up there and such a distinguished grown-up, too; one, moreover, who treated you with as much deference as though you had been a duchess seated there behind the beautiful tea equipage instead of just a small girl. Nancy found herself trying to live up to the position; she thrilled to the importance of it, so that her hands moved gracefully amongst the tea-things, and she felt that she really *was* a hostess sharing the responsibilities of that tea with the Prior.

And while they ate the Prior talked. There was nothing religious about his conversation; it was mostly stories of travels. Yes, and that was another curious thing. He seemed to have lived abroad far more than at the Priory, but, perhaps, they thought, he had other priories out there, for apparently he was a kind of head-person always. Governor was the word he used, probably that was what they called priors abroad.

And yet he did not seem to have to shut himself up in any of these priories. Also he had parties there, children's parties with no other grown-up

person there. He wanted the children to himself, he said ; other grown-ups spoilt things.

And then there were stories of big game shooting that thrilled the boys. Stories, too, of snakes. They regarded with respect and admiration the man who had actually found a snake popping up through a hole in a bedroom floor ; who had lived in a house haunted by vampire bats—crowds of them, and you heard weird flapping sounds, he said, when you were alone at night and suddenly—sizz ! out would go the lamp and you were in darkness alone with that horrible dark flying thing !

Thrillingly interesting stories, all of them, but now tea was finished, and the Prior suggested that they should sit in the Sunk Garden till bedtime. The children followed him willingly along a broad walk on the further side of the house, where masses of flowers were blazing in the hot sunshine. Two youths and a man were at work, and they touched their caps as the Prior and the children passed.

“ And are they monks ? ” Mavis asked, and again the Prior twinkled as he replied in the affirmative.

“ And are they too busy to pray in the day-time ? ” asked Nancy. “ I s’pose they have to pray longer at night to make up for it ? They must be awfully tired doing both.”

“ I don’t think,” the Prior replied, “ that they any of them spend long enough over their prayers for them to become a burden to them. Besides,” he added,

“there’s nothing to prevent them doing the two things together. A man who can grow flowers such as these,” he waved his hand towards the blaze of colour, “who can teach his sons to grow them, too, should have a prayer of gratitude to the good God continually in his heart and on his lips.”

“Oh, are they his sons? *Can* monks have sons?” Billy asked.

“These Monks can,” the Prior replied, and again, they were mystified by the fun in his eyes.

“Do they have specially long prayers for penance?” Nancy asked.

“Pray in penance?” the Prior’s eyes flashed a protest. “Certainly not—not here! Prayer should be offered from the fullness of the heart, child. Prayer should be—joy! Prayer should be, not the gabbling of a few sentences, but the act of living, living joyously. Anything less is an insult to the good God. But my tongue is running away with me,” he added with a smile. “You will think that I am going to preach.”

Well, if this was preaching, the children thought, it was much more interesting than the dull sermons the Vicar preached on Sundays. They felt a little uncomfortable, however, when they remembered their own gabbled prayers. Had they insulted God? They hadn’t meant to, of course, but it was not always easy to realize that God was listening to them. Certainly, the Prior’s way of praying sounded much nicer—so alive and *real*.

They passed another youth who was busy hoeing. Montague eyed him with interest.

“When I’m a man,” he growled, “I shall have a son *an’* a daughter. An’ the daughter shall be fifteen, and she shall cotton peas all day, and the son *he* shall hoe and weed and pick up sticks. An’ if he doesn’t, well, he’ll be *sorry*. An’ he’ll be sorry lots of other times, too—sorry all the time. If he fights with the village boys, or if he plays with them, or gives himself and them the best strawberries, and leaves none for the grown-ups’ tea, *then* he won’t like it—he’ll wish he’d never *seen* a strawberry.” Evidently something connected with strawberries rankled, for his voice was particularly bitter as he spoke of them. “And there will be a great-aunt to look after him,” he continued, “an’ *I* shall stay here and be a monk—*not* a gardening one—or live with my wife in a house by a wood, or p’raps go and kill lions by myself. And while I’m away the aunt will see if the boy wants punishing; she’ll know how to do it, ’cos,” and here his voice sank to a scarcely audible rumble, “she’ll have had lots of experience.”

He paused, but something in the curiously intent way in which the Prior was listening spurred him on.

“Well, if in a little while that boy forgets what happened about the strawberries and gives himself and the blacksmith’s son a raspberry tart and a jug of cream that was meant for a dinner party an’ a piece

of duck each—well, *I'll* not be there—but the aunt will ! ”

The Prior said nothing when, at last, Montague came to an end, but he walked thoughtfully, his hands behind his back, and there was pity and indignation, and, well, perhaps a little amusement in his eyes as he studied the boy.

But now the Sunk Garden was reached. Instinctively everyone paused at the top of the steps. Something, before entering that peaceful garden, must be put away, left behind. Something that was alien to the gentleness that seemed to play about the sun-dial and the subdued colouring of the flowers ; to the quiet sunlight flickering amongst the leaves on the tall trellis-work that enclosed the garden. The Prior put his hand affectionately on Montague's shoulder and rebellion suddenly seemed a little thing, so unimportant. The scent of heliotrope, the swooping of swallows, the lazy cawing of rooks seemed all that mattered.

The Prior led them to a stone seat round the sun-dial. Nancy immediately felt the atmosphere of the place and gave herself up to it. The swallows, too, attracted her. She watched them dropping and falling down the air ; against the blue of the sky ; their swift shadows on sun-dial or paving. Aunt Letty once said that the soul of a swallow was in its flight. Now, as she sat in the Sunk Garden, a garden that must have had swallows' shadows flickering over it for centuries,

she began to understand what Aunt Letty had meant. Every movement of the blue and white speck was graceful, whether it flashed across the garden, or slid down the air or climbed up towards the sky, all was grace and all was joy. Suddenly, she looked at the Prior and he caught her glance with a smile and a question.

"What is it, child?" he asked.

"Only——" she hesitated. "P'raps you won't like me saying it, but suddenly I thought you're like the swallows."

"I—like the swallows?" He looked at her in surprise.

"Yes! You see, they're joy, every bit of them is joy—they kind of can't go fast enough to splash it out of them, an' that's like you. You *won't* mind, will you?" She slipped her hand into his and looked at him anxiously.

"Mind? Of course not, my darling! And do I splash joy about?" he added, his eyes shining like two brown stars.

"Yes, indeed, it's all over you, and you kind of splash it all over us and over the garden, too."

"That's the nicest compliment I've ever had paid me in my life, child," and, lifting his hat, the Prior raised Nancy's hand to his lips.

"But it's not a compliment," Nancy protested, "it's the truth. We all love you, don't we?" she added, turning to the others.

“ Yes, indeed ! ” Mavis cried, scrambling on to the Prior’s knee.

Montague looked at the happy group and sighed.

“ When I am a man,” he began, “ I shall find a little girl with gold hair and I shall buy her a golden chair to sit in, but *sometimes* I shall ask her not to sit in the chair, but on my knee, and I will tell her lots of lovely stories. And nobody,” he continued, warming to his subject, “ shall ever hurt that little girl or be unkind to her, ’cos there’ll be *me* to look after her. And she shall be like a princess, and I shall do all the work for her and not let her carry things ; an’ if she doesn’t like lessons, well, she needn’t do ’em ’cos *I* shall say she needn’t. An’ if there’s only *one* nice ripe pear she shall have it, and I shall wait till she’s had all she wants before I have one. An’ if she’s tired there’ll be me to carry her, ’cos I shall be big and strong then. An’ I shall earn a pound a week and give it all to her, ’cept just enough to buy the food, an’ she shall *never* have schoolroom cake or rice pudding ! ”

“ Not boiled rice ! ” said Mavis. “ Oh, *I* wouldn’t like to be that little girl—I love boiled rice. An’ wouldn’t a gold chair be awfully hard ? ”

Montague, whose eyes had been fixed dreamily on a bed of heliotrope during his recital, looked up at Mavis with wonder in his eyes. Was it possible that a little girl whom he regarded almost as a princess could like boiled rice ?

"With jam?" Perhaps it was the jam that appealed to her.

"No. Sugar and milk."

"Well, she should have it." There was resignation in his voice. "An' she could have a cushion on the chair if it was too hard."

The Prior, meanwhile, was wearing his waiting-to-hear-what-would-come-next expression. He called Montague and drew him to his knee.

"So you are going to be a champion of little girls, are you, my boy?"

"One little girl," Montague corrected him, "with gold hair. P'raps," he added, looking at Nancy, "there could be another with brown hair."

"What colour hair," asked the Prior, "had that unfortunate daughter who was to cotton peas?"

"Black!" Montague replied. "Thick black hair. The kind," he muttered, forgetting that he was in the Sunk Garden, "that you can pull!"

"Oh!" said the Prior, looking at him thoughtfully. "Why pull the black hair and not the gold or chestnut? Why not be a champion of them all? Why pull the hair of one and give the others golden chairs, and the best fruit? Why not let them *all* have gold chairs? Think of it, boy, just think of it, if you gave her a gold chair how she'd love you!"

"She wouldn't," growled Montague, "she would *never* love me, not if I was to give her a gold throne!"

"Well, try it and see the result," the Prior encouraged him.

A gold throne for Jocelyne? The Prior didn't know her or he could not have suggested it.

"And what are you going to do when you are a man, Billy?" the Prior asked.

"Me? Oh, I'm going to be a traveller like you and my Uncle Val," Billy replied unhesitatingly. "Only," he added, "there's such a long time to wait; it seems an awful waste of time going to school when you might be *doing* things."

"Yes, yes, but make the best of it, Billy-boy. It's not quite as wasted, perhaps, as you imagine. Preparation is needed, you know, before you can attack anything as difficult as the life of a traveller. For it *is* a hard life."

"Yes, I know. Uncle Val says if there's grit in you it brings it out, and he says you've got to have grit in you to stick to it. *He* sticks to it, and *I* shall stick to it too." Billy threw back his head and thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "Uncle Val and I can't help going. He says it's Sir Walter Raleigh's fault."

"Sir Walter Raleigh's?"

"Yes. You see, when Uncle Val was a little boy there was always Sir Walter Raleigh calling him, calling him to look down the river away out to sea till he couldn't wait any longer. He made him join up when he was only seventeen, and after the war he

made him go abroad. And now Sir Walter Raleigh hasn't got Uncle Val, so he's calling me instead—we live in his house, you see."

The Prior looked at Billy rather strangely, as though he were trying to see something in his face.

"Where is your Uncle Val now?"

"In Egypt," Billy replied.

The Prior's eyes danced unaccountably with pleasure. He put Mavis down and rose abruptly. There was something in the library, he said, that might interest them.

The children followed readily. They returned to the house by way of the kitchen and fruit garden, beyond which were the stables. Ah, might they just go and say good-night to Modestine, they begged. The Prior remained outside while they went in to Modestine. Scraps of his conversation with the Monk who had charge of their donkey reached them, though at the time they paid but little heed to them.

"Yes, he's coming by ferry. You'll take the car—no, I can't come after all." The children appeared in the doorway. "Ah, ready, children? Now for the library."

CHAPTER VII

LIONEL AND DOROTHY

THEY entered the house by a side door and followed the Prior down a short passage that led straight to the library. The wide, mullioned windows of the room faced that part of the garden where the flowers made such a pageant of colour. What a delightful room it was, the children thought ; so different from the great, cold, silent hall where you felt such an insignificant atom. Here, with the wide windows letting in all the colour and sunshine of the garden, here, with the deep chairs and sinky-in carpet and the books and the curios and pictures you felt immediately at home.

The curios seemed to have come from all over the world, and you scarcely knew which to look at first.

“ Just wander round and look at what attracts you most,” the Prior said, seeing their bewilderment. “ Anything you want to know about them I’ll explain to you.”

And for the next quarter of an hour he was busy answering questions.

“ This ? I got it in India. That’s a Chinese junk—look at the carving. Yes, that’s an exact model of a Japanese house. That head was carved by a

Red Indian from the root of a tree. Those spears? I got them in the Sudan. Yes, these are panther skins. Yes, really, I shot the animals myself."

The children's interest was unabating. They tried to push away the unwelcome thought that seven o'clock must be nearly here.

Presently, Billy wandered over to a table that held some books and photos. Suddenly, he paused.

"Nancy, Mavis, come here!" he cried. "There's a photo of Uncle Val's friend, Mr. Pringle, here, just like the photo he brought with him last summer."

Nancy and Mavis, too interested in Billy's discovery to notice the smile of triumph on the Prior's face, flew across the room.

"Oh! It's him! Do you know him?" Nancy asked, turning eagerly to the Prior. "He's Uncle Val's greatest friend, and next time he comes home he's coming to see us. We don't know him yet 'cept what Uncle Val tells us about him. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I know him," the Prior replied.

"Have you known him long?" Billy asked.

"Nearly twenty-five years." The children did not know what to make of that baffling, teasing smile of the Prior's.

"An' is it long since you've seen him?" Mavis asked.

"I saw him when I came home from India in the spring. I stopped in Egypt especially to see him, because," he paused dramatically, "he's my son, you know!"

"Your son!" they shouted. "Then he's the Lionel who has a room here! Oh, isn't it wonderful."

Suddenly, a new thought struck Billy.

"You didn't see Uncle Val, too?" he asked slowly. "Uncle Val," he added, "is like me—only he's twenty-four and I'm ten."

The Prior still wore the teasing smile as he studied Billy.

"Let me see! Someone in Egypt like you? A grown-up edition of you, eh? Why, now I come to think of it, Lionel insisted on dragging along a certain Val Stafford with him. Could that be your Uncle Val?"

"Yes, yes!" they shrieked. "That's Uncle Val! And you've *seen* him! Oh, it's the God of Adventure that brought us here!"

The excitement was intense. When at length it subsided somewhat, Nancy enquired what the Prior thought of her uncle. Did he mind Lionel bringing him along? Did he like him?

The Prior turned and looked at Billy.

"If that young man over there grows up anything like his uncle he'll be a brother you can be proud of. *I* am proud that Lionel should have him for a friend."

"Oh, doesn't it make you kind of belong to us?" Nancy cried impulsively. She replaced Lionel's photo on the table and, as she did so, caught sight of another one. It was of a little girl of about her own age, a little girl who looked at her with Lionel's laughing eyes.

“ Oh ! ”

She looked up quickly and caught the Prior's glance—no need to ask any questions, what she wanted to know was written on the Prior's face. She slipped her hand into his.

“ An' you're letting Mavis and me have *her* room ? ”

“ Yes, dear,” he replied, his hand on her head. “ You are just the kind of little girls she would have liked to share it with. My little Dorothy was an open-air child, just as you are.”

“ Was she—was she ill a long time ? ”

“ No, dear. She was following the hounds and was thrown from her horse. Lionel, poor boy, found her. But—listen, children ! ”

Seven o'clock ! Oh, what a waste of time bed would be at such a place as this !

A knock at the door and Mrs. White entered.

“ Ah, Mrs. White ! Hot baths, sponge cake and milk, and bed, please ! ”

He kissed Nancy and Mavis very tenderly and pressed an affectionate hand on the boys' shoulders.

“ Good-night, and thank you for letting us have Dorothy's room,” Nancy whispered.

They followed Mrs. White upstairs, each child busy with his or her own thoughts about this wonderful place and all that had happened there. Lionel's room came first, a real boy's room, into which the girls took a peep while Mrs. White was showing the boys where they should take their bath.

"Now, my dears, Miss Dorothy's room is down this corridor if you are ready."

They kissed Billy good-night and then, quite naturally first Nancy then Mavis turned to Montague and kissed him in turn, and, waving good-night, followed Mrs. White to Dorothy's room.

Montague for quite half a minute stood in the doorway. Nancy and Mavis had kissed him—just as they had kissed Billy. They had kissed him, not pecked him as Jocelyne did—how he writhed under those pecks! This had happened to him, Montague. Feelings he could not understand pounded away at the starved little heart; thoughts and words—comradeship, comradeship, that was it, that was how the Prior had touched him, that was what had been behind their kiss.

"If anybody ever hurts them I'll *kill* them," he growled inwardly.

"Come on, old chap, I'm half-undressed."

Comradeship again in Billy's jolly voice. How Montague responded to it, how wonderful it was. Later on, when after the baths and sponge cake and milk, the Prior's last injunction had been obeyed, and they lay in the two small beds side by side, Montague asked Billy a question.

"Do you *love* your sisters?"

"Why, of course!"

"I wish," Montague muttered, "I had a sister I loved."

"But why not love Jocelyne?"

"Love Jocelyne? You don't know her! 'Sides, she doesn't love me—we quarrel!"

"Well, so do we sometimes," Billy admitted. "Why, we used to fight like anything when we were little kids. Course we don't now 'cos boys don't hit girls when they're big, though sometimes they'd jolly well like to. But quarrels don't really make any difference—you can always make it up again."

"Not with Jocelyne," Montague protested mournfully.

And yet, and yet, had there not been a time long, long ago when their mother was alive when he and Jocelyne *had* loved each other? Why then did they not love each other now? Montague did not know, he could not remember when they had stopped caring.

"Listen! There's a car!" murmured Billy sleepily. "Another boarder, I s'pose. *He* won't be able to keep the rule of going to bed at seven—p'raps the Prior will excuse him."

"Well, we'll see him at matins or breakfast, I s'pose," Montague replied. And then silence fell between them, and a minute later two small boys were fast asleep.

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An hour or more later, while the children slept, the Prior and the new "boarder," who, apparently, was allowed to break rules, were walking up and down the beech lawn smoking and talking and thinking and planning.

"It's the boy Montague I'm thinking of," the Prior was saying. "The other three would certainly be bitterly disappointed if we sent them home to-morrow, Billy especially, for he's a sticker—he and Val Stafford are made of the stuff that does pioneer work, the finest stuff in the world, but they love their home and their parents, and the going back would have no sting in it apart from the fact of giving up their adventure. But Montague! That acidulated aunt should be made to suffer, the boy's spirit is cramped and starved, and these three little people, quite unconsciously, are having the right influence on him. A week or so with them, wandering about amongst the hills, forgetting himself in looking after little Mavis—what a difference it would make to the boy! What can you suggest, Dick?"

Dick Frampton, whom the God of Adventure had brought to this Priory of Adventures to-day of all days, smoked in silence for a few minutes before replying.

"Wait a moment, Uncle, I believe we can arrange something. But, I say, don't you think we should let Montague's guardian know that the boy is all right and leave it to him to tell the aunt if he wishes to. I can 'phone him up."

The Prior agreed, and the two fell to further discussions, both of them entering with the zest of schoolboys into the plans for the children's further travels.

It was at dinner that the Prior had first mentioned to his nephew (who had come to spend a few days with him) about the unexpected little guests who were asleep upstairs. Dick, whose thoughts had been with the children most of the day, though he had imagined them safely at Nestcombe long ere this, knew instinctively that the Prior's guests were his "libation" children. He was annoyed with himself for not guessing from the fact that they had blankets with them, that the adventure was to be of more than one day's duration. He was dismayed at the thought of what might have happened to them through his stupidity.

"Do you know how long they intend travelling?" he asked.

The Prior shook his head and laughed like a boy.

"I've asked no questions—not one. It was Billy telling me about his Uncle Val that put me on the scent; the name, you know, and then the strong likeness between the boy and Val. I took them into the library on the chance that their uncle might have shown them Lionel's photograph and that they would recognize it—and they did!"

The Prior was delighted with himself.

"And I've wired to their people," he continued gleefully.

To Dick's enquiry as to how he knew the address, oh, that was a simple matter, he replied. Didn't Val Stafford live at Nestcombe, when he was in Eng-

land, and hadn't Billy told him how Sir Walter Raleigh had influenced them both. Simple enough to guess that they shared the same home.

"And their people will fetch them to-morrow, I suppose?"

"No." The Prior wore the air of a conspirator. "I told them to do nothing until they heard from me again—I wanted first to consult you. Also I wanted to know what, if anything, you knew about the small boy they had picked up at Riversham—I felt sure you must know something about him."

And Dick, seated there at the dinner-table, was able to tell the Prior that the great-aunt was one of his pet aversions. The guardian was the novelist, James Cradock. Dick had met him several times lately and liked him. Montague's mother had been dead two or three years, and the father had died a few months ago, from the result of wounds received in the war; he had suffered terribly for some time, Dick had gathered from Mr. Cradock.

"And this sister, what of her?" the Prior asked. "Montague seems to have no love for her."

"Jocelyne? Oh, she's at the age when small boys of Montague's type grate. A handsome girl, but, of course, Montague doesn't appreciate her beauty—he couldn't, they're both at the wrong age. What they need, I suppose, is some influence to bring out the best in each of them. It's there all right, though they would neither of them believe it of the other."

And it was this that had set the Prior—or Mr. Pringle, as everybody except the children called him—thinking, this obvious need of Montague's for something that had so evidently been denied him lately. It was this that had caused him to wire as he did to the Staffords. Why should the children not continue their travels for a few more days? Why not let the influence of the hills and the free, roving life and the comradeship of the other children do their work with the boy? Why not? Yet how to persuade the parents to countenance the plan? How persuade them that no harm could come to them amongst these friendly hills? And, was he altogether sure himself that they *would* be perfectly safe with nobody at hand to protect them?

“Look here,” said Dick, and this was the “further discussion” that had taken place while they smoked their after-dinner cigars on the beech-lawn, “I’ve got an idea.”

The idea was that Dick should return home at once, motor over to Nestcombe from Riversham and explain matters to Mr. and Mrs. Stafford. And if they consented to allow the children to go on he would act as a kind of warden to them and follow them about in his car.

“It would be quite simple,” he added, “and I should like it—it would be an adventure for *me*. What do you think of the idea?”

The Prior (for though he is not a prior, we, like the children, will call him that—there being nothing about

his character to suggest the stiffness of "Mr. Pringle") was all enthusiasm for it. Mrs. White, he said, should pack their baskets with good things, and they should set off soon after breakfast unless he heard from Dick to the contrary.

"But what about money?" Dick enquired. "Shall we give them something?"

The Prior shook his head.

"I imagine they have some money," he said, "quite enough to last them a few days. Better not give them any more—they'd be safer without it—also I think they prefer their independence. Let them get through it and then use your judgment."

And so the matter was settled.

As the two conspirators strolled back to the house together Dick fell to marvelling at the extraordinary coincidence of the day. Would the children, he wondered, if they knew all, regard the happenings in the light of an adventure?

"They are out to seek it, you know," he explained.

The Prior nodded.

"I gathered so—there was some mention of the God of Adventure in the library, though I imagine their idea of *real* adventure is something more definite, more actual than what has happened to-day. But, after all, my boy, there's nothing extraordinary about these happenings. Life is all adventure, it's always the unexpected that happens. That, at any rate, has been my experience all the world over."

Dick agreed. Yes, of course, his uncle was right. Was not adventure waiting round the corner for us always? Was it not our own fault if we let it pass by? Well, here were he and his uncle in the thick of an adventure that *they* had not let slip past them. The sleeping children upstairs, his uncle who could never grow old, he himself with the joy of youth throbbing in his veins, which of them all would most eagerly stretch out responsive hands to the beckoning god?

The Prior ordered the car when they reached the house and they waited in the library while William Monk, the butler, sent the order to his brother, John Monk, the chauffeur. The appearance of William Monk reminded the Prior of yet one other bit of fun he had to share with Dick, namely, the children's mistake regarding him and the other members of the Monk family.

"I'm indulging in a bit of make-believe that some day they and I will laugh over together," he explained. "Why not let them believe, at least till their adventure is over, that Monk and his brother and cousin and nephews are monks in very truth? It adds to the romance of things for them. This ought, they said, to have been a monastery, but a priory, they thought, might be nearly as good. Imagine their hurt pride if they knew that they had asked to be taken in at a private house? Ah, but *some day*, as I said, they shall hear their Prior's side of the question and learn the happiness they have given him."

CHAPTER VIII

MATINS AND BREAKFAST

WHEN Nancy and Mavis awoke the following morning it was almost eight o'clock by the latter's watch. Eight o'clock! How strange to sleep so late. Usually they were up and dressed soon after seven. Yet how sleepy they still felt. They did not understand that such a day as yesterday—the fresh air, the tramping, and the various excitements that had followed one after another—such a day demands extra hours of sleep for tired little brains and bodies.

They lay for a little while looking drowsily round Dorothy's room. Last night they had fallen asleep almost as soon as their heads had touched the pillow, and the room, though attractive even to two weary little girls, had not revealed itself to them as it did now, with the sunlight pouring in through the windows. How Dorothy must have loved it. What pretty pictures; one, a range of snow-capped Indian mountains particularly attracted them.

“Why, p'raps Dorothy lived in India when she was a tiny girl,” Nancy exclaimed. “How interesting.”

They were longing to see the world beyond those

hills they could see as they lay in bed ; Dorothy, perhaps, had seen the world beyond those towering, snowy ranges.

They thought a great deal about Dorothy and Dorothy's treasures as they scrambled into their clothes. To have had all this, to have had this beautiful room with its books and toys and dolls—dolls that certainly were not bought in England—and then one winter's day to have gone out lightheartedly and never to have returned. Nancy shuddered as, in her imagination, she saw the laughing, joyous, eager face of the child in the photograph downstairs, saw her flying after the hounds and then—the accident and never, never any more sparkle in the closed eyes. It was the nearest she had ever come to Death, at least as regarded anyone young (old people, she thought, were different, and her sensitive spirit recoiled from the cruelty of it.

“ Poor, poor Dorothy,” she thought. “ *Why* did it have to happen ? ”

And then she thought of the Prior, who evidently cared so much for children. How he must have missed Dorothy. Ah, they would have to love him very dearly to make up to him for his loss. When they got home again he must come very, very often to visit them.

A few minutes later they were startled by the solemn clanging of a bell.

“ The chapel bell ! ” they cried together, and a delightful thrill of awe and expectation swept over

them. The bell sounded so exactly like what one imagined a priory or monastery bell should be. And at last they would see all the monks, proper gowned monks! Matins and monks! Feeling that they were stepping into a world absolutely remote from the ordinary everyday world they ran hand in hand down the corridor and found the boys coming to meet them. Billy, as they descended the stairs, told them of the arrival of the new boarder.

"We shall see him at matins," he said. "Hope he's a decent sort."

The Prior, who was waiting for them in the great hall, came forward to meet them, but there was no sign of the new boarder. He conducted them down a corridor and across an open quadrangle, beyond which was the chapel.

"Visitors are not allowed in the chapel itself," he said, as they approached the beautiful building, "you will listen behind the grating."

The grating? Ah, yes, yesterday he had said something about a grating, but they had given no further thought to it. What *was* a grating, and why were they not allowed in the chapel? Oh, certainly they were getting far, far, beyond the confines of the everyday world.

Feeling decidedly mystified they followed the Prior through a tiny door in the north wall and along a narrow passage that led to a tiny chamber, where they found Mrs. White awaiting them. She rose to receive

them and the Prior hurried away with his usual impetuous stride.

The children were puzzled. Could this tiny room possibly be part of a chapel? A nuns' grating, the Prior had mentioned yesterday. Used there to be nuns here as well as monks, and had they to squeeze into this bit of a place? Why, there was scarcely room for themselves and Mrs. White. If the other boarder should turn up, it certainly would be a tight squeeze.

The grating was so high in the wall that although Mrs. White, if she had wished, could have seen into the chapel quite easily it was impossible for any of the children to do so, unless they had stood on chairs, and, with Mrs. White there, they hardly liked to do that. How tiresomely sedate and unthrilled she looked, thought Nancy. Did nothing ever excite her? Didn't she understand the *romance* of listening to the distant singing of monks in a priory chapel—had she *no* imagination?

For the chanting or singing had started soon after their arrival. It had a curiously muffled sound coming through the narrow grating, and the children could not be sure whether the words were English or Latin. To be sure the tunes sounded familiar, but, after all, was that anything extraordinary? The Prior, if he liked a tune, was not the person to reject it because it was sung in the Church of England. Ah, there were boys singing, too; probably acolytes. It was just

a little disappointing not to be able to see; a wall was not the most interesting thing to gaze at, at the best of times, and when it was shutting out monks and acolytes it was certainly very annoying. And the Prior would be wearing his gown. Ah, someone was praying. Was it the Prior? The voice sounded like his—oh, what a troublesome rule this was, that shut you up in a little box where you could see nothing! But, after all, was it not the very first rule that had been even a little disagreeable? They felt somewhat ashamed as they thought of the heaped-up kindnesses they had received at the Priory. But Mrs. White was speaking.

“Matins are over.” She rose as she spoke. “The offertory bag,” she added, “is on that table behind you.”

Was there just the suspicion of a smile hovering round the usually sedate mouth?

Billy passed the bag first to Mrs. White and then to the children.

“Shall I put it back on the table?” he whispered, after he had added his own small offering, wishing with all his heart that it could have been bigger. It was so absurdly disproportionate to all they had received.

“No, I will give it to—to the Prior presently. He sets special store by these offerings, he says.”

“Do they—do they help keep up the Priory?” Nancy asked as they left the chapel. It must cost

so much, she thought, to keep up this huge place. And then there was the food for all the monks.

"Not exactly," was Mrs. White's evasive reply ;
"the Prior has a special use for them."

Crossing the quadrangle, Mavis ventured to enquire whether Mrs. White had known Lionel and Dorothy. Imagine their delight when they learned that not only had she known them, but that she had been their nurse. Such questions then had they to ask her about the childhood of her charges. And did she know that her "Master Lionel" was their uncle's special friend, that probably at this very moment they were together ?

The Prior and breakfast awaited them on the beech lawn. The boarder they decided must have been allowed to break yet another rule, for the table was laid for only five people.

They seated themselves, Nancy again presiding, and the Prior again entertaining them with delightful stories. They had not quite finished their bacon and eggs when Monk appeared with a telegram for the Prior. The latter opened it eagerly, and, as he read, a look of pleasure settled on his face.

"No answer, Monk, thank you," he said, and then turned to his young guests with an apology.

"Excuse me, my dears, but the telegram, I knew, referred to an important matter. Arranging other people's affairs," he added, passing his cup for more coffee, "is a terrible responsibility."

" I s'pose a Prior has lots to do for other people," Nancy remarked. " Does it worry you ? "

" Sometimes, my child. But in this case the pleasure I have experienced in arranging for the happiness of certain—certain people in whom I am interested has far outweighed any trouble their affairs have occasioned me."

" Does a Prior have to look after everybody and make them happy ? " asked Mavis.

The Prior laughed.

" It's his *privilege* to dispense happiness, my darling."

Montague, after he had helped himself to honey, regarded the Prior thoughtfully.

" Does a Prior like everybody ? " he asked. " Does he have to ? "

The Prior shook his head.

" No, no, my boy, he doesn't *have* to. Usually, however, he is too busy to bother about the people who are—well, antipatica."

" Oh, what is ' antipatica ' ? " asked Nancy, interested at once in the new word.

The Prior beamed on her.

" A new word that, eh, Nancy ? You, I think, have not experienced the meaning of it yet. It means someone you cannot get in contact with, someone, in fact, who rubs you up the wrong way."

" Aunts is anti—antipatica," growled Montague, stumbling a little over the long word. " They do lots of rubbing. They wake up in the mornings with rub,

rub, rub, in their minds, and it goes on all day steady." He paused to take a bite of bread and honey. Nobody spoke, for they felt there was more to come, for, once Montague got started, he seemed to have to get quite to the end of his subject before he could break off. "They've got wide-open beady eyes," he continued, "all round their heads they've got 'em, an' the eyes help them to rub. Rub? I tell you it's nothing but rub, rub, rub till, if you're a boy an' you live with them, you kind of feel as though you're sore inside—just the same as if sheets and sheets of emery paper had been used on you. Aunts," he added gravely, "aunts is best living alone, then they couldn't be—be, well, that word you said."

A giggle broke from Billy. Montague looked up sharply.

"What cher laughing at?" he growled ominously, but Billy, far from being intimidated, giggled again, and the two little girls and even the Prior seemed decidedly amused. Montague was hurt. "*You'd* all think aunts was that if you lived with one, least, if she was like the aunt I know," he added, remembering that the children's experience of an aunt seemed to differ from his own.

"It's not the aunt, Mont," Billy explained, "it's you. You're so funny with your 'rub, rub, rub.'"

"Well, being rubbed by aunts isn't a bit funny, *I* can tell you."

"Oh, we know, Monty dear," Nancy exclaimed.

"We think she's horrid. It's only the way you looked and the way you said it all."

The Prior wore a somewhat inscrutable expression. The boy was evidently from his own showing a handful, and probably it was his, the Prior's, duty to point out to him the necessity for such as he to undergo a certain amount of discipline.

"Discipline tempered by love, yes," he mused, "but discipline dispensed by an acidulated aunt——"

And so he delivered no homily to the small volcanic person seated at his table, but led the conversation away from the things that hurt. Why, when life was so short, when summer was in its prime, let the happy hours of sunlight slip away darkened by hurts that are best forgotten? In a very little while he had the children laughing and joking together over delightful nothings. He seemed to throw out sparkles of fun and joy and the children picked them up and tossed them to each other. Montague's dark eyes lost their brooding sorrows, and the small face expanded with laughter.

And there were more stories. Stories of earthquakes in India, of moonlight picnics in the West Indies, of cañons ablaze with flowers in South America. Stories, too, of Lionel and Dorothy's childhood. Yes and most of it *had* been spent in India; Dorothy *had* seen behind those towering ranges. Oh, the wonder and the bigness of the childhood of those two; surely no day could ever have been just ordinary everyday.

And could either of them *ever* have found time, with adventure heaped all about them, to even think of doing those things that, to grown-ups, were known as "being naughty"; to yourself, as "just wanting to know—just finding out." Surely the days had just slipped away, just as now in the Priory garden time was slipping away unheeded.

"Boys," said Montague thoughtfully, when, at last, they rose from the table, "boys could always be good if a Prior told them stories all day—an' if a little girl with gold hair could be there listening too. B'lieve it's *work* that makes them do things aunts hate."

The Prior put his head on one side and regarded Montague with a smile.

"It is quite possible," he said, "that if a small boy lived with me *I* might ask him to work. I might find quite a number of things that I should like nobody but the small boy to do for me. And the results, if I ventured to ask him, you think would prove disastrous?"

"There wouldn't be *no* disaster," Montague replied decidedly. You might loathe hoeing for an aunt who continually rubbed you up the wrong way, but to work for the Prior—Montague got excited. "Why, I could do *lots* of things for you," he continued eagerly.

"I know how to make things and I could mend anything. My guardian he calls me 'The Flaming Tin-man' (that's somebody in a book), 'cos I can tinker. Me and the blacksmith's son tinker together. I

can use a saw ; I wouldn't hurt it if you'd lend me one, and I'd make you a table or a thing to hold your pipes. Work sometimes," he concluded, " is *nice*."

" Well, some day you shall come and stay here, and we will work together. How about that ? "

Montague's face expressed his approval. He would have discussed the happy prospect further, but Billy was getting restless. Could he, he enquired, go and get Modestine ready now ?

The Prior looked at him tentatively.

" The rules of the Priory," he said, " would permit you all to stay to luncheon."

Ready acceptance was written on three small faces, but Billy hesitated.

" Why not," the Prior continued, " explore the country round here ? Take lunch with you and come back to tea and stay the night. Yes, another night would be allowed ; even a week or more in special cases. Why not do this, unless of course," he added, " you have some settled plans that must be carried out."

Montague and the girls looked at Billy for, somehow, they felt that it was for him to decide. A troubled look crossed his face. What the Prior offered sounded so jolly, and yet, and yet hadn't they said they wanted to see beyond the hills, and this, after all, was merely the beginning of the hills ?

" I'd like to stay awfully," he said slowly, " but we *did* have a settled plan an'—an' I think we'd better

go on, thank you. You won't mind, will you, or think we don't *want* to stay ? "

The Prior, knowing Billy, understood.

" But remember," he said, " if anything should happen to prevent you carrying out your plans, or if at any time you need a night's rest, the Priory gates are always open to you. You won't forget ? "

" Indeed we won't," Billy replied warmly, " and we're ever so grateful to you."

The Prior brushed away their thanks.

" Now run and ask Monk to help you saddle Modestine while I see Mrs. White. I believe she wants to replenish that basket of yours."

CHAPTER IX

THE ROSE-VICAR

HALF-AN-HOUR later the Prior bade his little guests a reluctant good-bye at the foot of the lane leading into the village street.

“Good-bye, my dears, remember what I told you. And, Billy, put this safely in your pocket. It’s a telegram addressed to me. If you are in—well, if you happen to need me just send that off, giving the name of the village or town where I can find you, and I’ll come in the car immediately.” Nothing, of course, *could* happen, he knew, with Dick there to keep watch over them. However, no harm in taking all precautions.

Hat in hand, he stood at the corner until they were out of sight, and, until they could no longer see him, the children turned frequently and waved.

Each small heart was too full for speech for a long time.

“I b’lieve,” Nancy said presently, “he was just as sorry to lose us as we were to leave him.”

So keen indeed was their regret at having parted with their kind and interesting friend, that for a long while their thoughts centred about him and the Priory to the exclusion of the hills. To be content to stick to one’s original plans was not altogether easy, even Billy found, yes, even when they were such delightful

plans. Nobody quite knew how hard it had been for him to refuse the Prior's invitation and all that it embraced.

"Wasn't it nice of him not to ask lots of questions?" Nancy said as they turned into the lane that evidently led up into the hills. "Most people would have wanted to know all about us, but *he* treated us just as though we were grown-ups."

"If aunts were like that to you, you mightn't hate 'em so," Montague rumbled. "When I'm a man——" He broke off suddenly, for his companions were convulsed with laughter. "*Now* what are you laughing at?" he growled. He could have wished to be treated with considerably more respect.

"It's only your voice sounds so funny, Monty, dear, when you talk about aunts or when you're a man," Mavis explained. "It sounds as though——"

"As though something inside you is fizzling," Nancy finished. "But go on, Monty. We love you to talk to us. Please go on."

"Well, *you'd* fizzle if you were me. You'd fizzle and fizzle and *fizzle* till you burst. My guardian," he began reminiscently, "he says——"

"Yes, Monty, what does he say?" Mavis (she was riding Modestine) leaned down towards him expectantly.

"I think what he says is silly, 'cos you don't have beards till you're men. He says I mumble volcanically into my beard when I talk of aunts. *He* thinks it's

funny—I don't. 'Sides, well, if he lived with her much I guess he'd mumble into his beard—he'd grow one specially to do it."

"I like your guardian," Mavis said. "Wouldn't it be nice if you could bring him to see us when we go home?"

"Guess he wouldn't come," Montague said. "I don't know why, but he never will go that way for walks. He says that side of Riversham's too painful now."

"Too painful? What does he mean?" asked Nancy.

"I don't know. B'lieve he used to come down before I came to aunt; said he'd got the pain then, and it's still there, and it'd be worse if he put a foot the other side of Riversham. S'pose it's corns or something. Is the road bad your way?"

"Not particularly," Nancy replied. "But I don't think it sounds like corns. Sounds *almost* as though he's meaning something he can't tell you plain."

The conversation came to an end abruptly. Modestine, who, refreshed by her long rest, had hitherto been in her most amiable mood, suddenly decided to give trouble. The little lane had opened out into a broad road and the children saw that, by turning to the left, they would begin to climb towards a shoulder of the hills that had had a particular fascination for them ever since they had left the Priory. Modestine, however, for some reason known only to herself, decided that she preferred the turn to the right, and,

as the children very well knew, once Modestine had made a decision it was difficult to turn her from it.

"Don't give in, Mavis," Billy said. "Keep her head turned to the left. Oh, I say, are you getting giddy? You'd better jump down and I'll lead her."

Nancy helped Mavis to dismount, while Billy clung to the bridle, laughing. Round and round he and Modestine went. Round and round, each determined not to give in. They might have continued making circles there for the rest of the day had not a Good Samaritan in the shape of a clergyman come to their rescue.

"Trouble here with a donkey, eh?" he asked genially, seeing the situation. "Suppose I see what can be done."

Billy very readily allowed him to take charge of Modestine.

"She's awfully strong, you know," he explained. "And *fearfully* obstinate."

"Most donkeys are," the clergyman replied. "I've met them before." He, however, was big and strong, and it was not very long before Modestine was conquered.

"Thank you ever so much," Billy said gratefully. "She'll be all right now; she soon gets over things, you know."

"She gets ideas and likes to carry them out, I suppose? And generally they clash with *your* ideas, is that it?"

"Yes, that's it!" Billy replied with a grin, as he

helped Mavis to mount. "But she can't help it, of course, as she's a donkey."

"Of course not. If you are born a donkey why not live up to your reputation, eh?" He continued walking with them as they began to climb the hill, and chatted pleasantly.

Presently, he paused by the gate of a house that stood back from the road, evidently his Vicarage, for at the side of the house was a little church.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asked. "I was wondering whether you would like to see some roses—I have a few. Bring the donkey and we'll tether her to that little gate up the drive."

Mavis dismounted and they followed their new friend with ready interest; seeing somebody else's garden was always interesting, no matter how few the roses—it was something new, it was unknown territory.

As they turned into the drive a car came flying along the road. Nancy, the last of the little procession, paused with the instinct of the country-bred child to glance at it. She gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Billy," she said, "I believe that was Mr. Frampton."

Well, after all, had he not mentioned that he was coming to the hills? Such a pity though to have missed him. Nancy was almost sorry they had accepted the Vicar's invitation to see the roses.

The latter, after fastening Modestine to the gate he had mentioned, led them past a shrubbery towards his roses.

“ Oh ! Oh ! ”

All they could do was to stand still and gasp at the unexpected glory of the sight before them. A few roses, the Vicar had said ! Why, there must be hundreds of them, thousands even ! Roses of every shape and colour, tiny bushes simply covered with huge blossoms—beds and beds of them and, enclosing the beds, great trellised crimson roses, the sweetest and loveliest of them all.

The Vicar was delighted at their pleasure.

“ You love roses ? ” he asked. “ *I*, you know, shouldn’t be happy without a few—I’ve more over there, but these are the best. That’s a bed of cuttings through that arch. How many ? Oh, about a thousand, I think. That ground,” he added, with a guilty sigh, “ should be growing potatoes, but—well, I’m a terror for roses, a terror, my friends tell me.”

He led them round the beds.

“ That’s a Hugh Dickson ! ” Nancy exclaimed. “ Isn’t he a beauty ? ”

The Vicar caught up her enthusiasm, marking with delight her human interest. How many children would have cared enough to say “ he ” ?

“ You know him ? You know something about roses ? ”

“ Oh, no ! ” Nancy’s tone was deprecating. “ Only, we’ve got a few, *really* a few, at home. We’ve got a little garden each, and I have ‘ Hugh ’ and Billy has ‘ Independence Day ’ and Mavis has ‘ Betty.’ ”

The Vicar looked as though he could embrace them all.



He stooped and cut off a great crimson velvet fellow.

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“ Splendid ! Splendid ! ” he cried.

Then he slowly pulled out a knife and stood looking first at his ‘ Hugh Dickson,’ then at Nancy, then again at the rose.

“ It’s my very best, my prize ‘ Hugh,’ but you know something about roses. Yes, you must have just one off him,” and he stooped and cut off a great crimson velvet fellow and handed it as though it had been a pearl of great price to Nancy.

Nancy who could see what the gift had cost him could scarcely express her thanks. She felt indeed that it was priceless ; part of the Vicar’s self was surely there ; so much of him must have been expended on the growing of these roses.

“ And now,” he said, “ a bunch from some of the others ! ”

Here and there amongst the rose beds he went with his knife. Red and white and pink roses, lemon roses, apricot roses, sunset roses were heaped into the children’s outstretched arms. How could mere words express what was in their hearts ? Nancy and Mavis buried their faces in the treasures they held. The Vicar stood and looked at the picture. “ The consummation of beauty ! ” he muttered. Then the astonished children saw him pull out a pencil and scribble on his cuff.

“ A thought for my next sermon,” he explained, noticing their undisguised curiosity. “ Dear me, I should be writing now ! Ah, these roses, these roses—they are apt to lead one astray from one’s duty. I

must go. Come again any time you are passing, and while there are roses you shall have some."

Nancy, as she watched him walk reluctantly to the house, wondered whether their own Vicar's sermons might not be less dull if he took thoughts with him from a rose garden as this Vicar had done instead of droning uninterestingly about lifeless things one could not understand.

But now, what to do with the roses? That was their difficulty, as they took the hot road again. To have refused them would have been impossible, to let them wither in the sunshine would be wicked. They wrapped them in Mavis' cloak and the child carried them in front of her.

"I wish," said Nancy, "we could send them to the Prior and ask him to put them on Dorothy's grave."

The very nicest thing possible to do with them, the others agreed. They could buy a cardboard box when they came to a village.

So far, however, no village was in sight, nothing now but the steep hill mounting higher and higher. Curious how often their thoughts had strayed from the hills, from what they hoped to find beyond them, but if interesting things cropped up what were you to do? Now, however, as they slowly climbed, as the summit drew near, they felt again in all its intensity, that great longing that had lured them from their home. Oh, such a little while now and there would be never, never any more longing—they would have at last *seen*!

CHAPTER X

AN ENCOUNTER ON THE HILLS

NOW a strange thing happened on the top of the hills. It will be remembered that the children's great desire was not only to climb and explore the hills, but to see *beyond* them, and that the seeing beyond them was perhaps more important than the hills themselves. It will be remembered, too, that the forest country belonged to the familiar everyday life, that until that glimpse they had had of it on the lower hill the previous day, they had never even remotely associated it with romance. Nevertheless, when, by happy leaps and bounds they finally reached the top of the hill, only *one* child out of the four had eyes for the Unknown the others, Nancy, Billy, and Mavis turned instinctively towards the distant forest! Think of it! To have travelled so many long, long miles, to have had the desire burning in your heart ever since you could remember, to see beyond the hills, then, when at last the big world was before you to reject it for what you could see any day of your life. Ah, but *could* you? Could you, when it was all around you, see it in all

its beauty, could you see it as the hill people saw it? Surely, if you were a hill person you could not rest until you had explored that forest; reached to the very heart of it. A curious pride in their forest country, in the golden river at its feet awoke in the children's hearts—it was theirs, their very own and they loved it. Was it possible that Daddy Petherham loved it like this and that was why—— Ah, but they *couldn't* be like Daddy Petherham, who wanted only *one* thing! And so, with very mixed feelings three young adventurers turned at last to the world beyond the hills.

“Come and see!” Montague called eagerly. “There’s hills and *hills* over there! An’ it’s so funny—’cross on the other side of the valley there’s a village, and all the houses are climbing up the hill. See, the people in one house can stand at their front door and look down into the chimneys of the houses below.”

The forest influence, however, was still hanging over the three children. Why, that was nothing, they said, it was like that in the forest, too; yes, and it was so steep that the coalman couldn’t get up to the houses; he just dumped the coal down on the cart-track that ran through the forest and the people had to carry it up themselves as best they could. Montague should see for himself when they got home. So, after all, it was the Suffolk boy, just in these first moments, who was most thrilled by the Unknown. Yet,

gradually as they stood taking in the scene, the magic of the hills asserted itself again. The spaciousness around them, yes, this, indeed, was something different from the forest country. And hills encircling you, always hills. Beyond the village across the valley distant wooded hills, densely wooded, yet, somehow, different from the hilly forest. Yes, and, after all, there was a certain inexpressible difference between the village where the houses grew one above the other and the villages up in the forest. *What* was the difference and why, in spite of your love for your home country, did you feel that you must go on exploring, penetrating further into the Unknown?

And would the hills want them, Nancy wondered? Suddenly, she realized that they were strangers in a strange country. What, after all, did they know of the hills? They might be cold and heartless hills; they might not want children to come poking their noses into their secrets. *Would* they resent their coming, or would they open their hearts in friendly fashion just as the dear forest country did, just as the restless river did, year in year out?

Nancy's dreams (being Nancy she could not help getting beyond the actual; everything had to be received into the imagination part of her) were disturbed by Montague, who announced that he was so hungry he knew he could not walk another step until they had had dinner. Hungry? Even Nancy found that she was ravenous, and, settling where they were,

they immediately attacked the good things Mrs. White had packed for them.

They discussed the roses while they ate. They were still quite fresh, for, further down the hill, they had again found a tiny spring and had drenched the stalks in it. They must cross the valley and try to get a box at the village and post them to the Prior. Yes, Nancy said, a pity to have to do that, for now that the hills were attained her next desire was to see Gleambridge cathedral from this side, and to do so, they knew they should keep straight ahead. However, the flowers *must* be sent ; they were of first importance.

How hungry the hill air made you, how fortunate you had plenty to eat. Impossible, however, for Nancy to concentrate entirely on the food ; not even on Mrs. White's delicious cheesecake.

" I think the wind's got inside me," she announced. " I feel like a bird. Oh, it's a glorious thrilly feeling ! "

Forgetting the cheesecake in her hand and Billy's proximity, she stretched out her arms—the result was disastrous !

" It's a beastly sticky feeling," Billy giggled, " not a thrilly one ! "

" These spasms come at such awkward times," Nancy apologized, as she wiped Billy's head, first with paper, and then with her own handkerchief. " I wish they would not make me do such bothersome things."

" So do I ! " Billy grinned. " I'll take jolly good

care not to sit near you next time I see a thrill coming."

Montague interrupted them.

"There's a car coming. Hear it? Let's see who can tell the make first, Billy. Bet you *I* will!"

"Bet you *I* will!" Billy replied, taking up the challenge. "It's coming up from that valley. Now! It's a—it's a——"

They all scrambled to their feet in their excitement.

"It's Mr. Frampton's!" Nancy cried. "I know it, 'cos it's the one I saw this morning! Let's wave and stop him!"

She ran eagerly towards the car, which drew up immediately. A look of intense relief replaced an anxious, worried frown on Dick Frampton's face.

"Oh," he began, "I thought I should never——" He stopped abruptly. "What are you little people doing here?" he added.

"Oh, just exploring the hills," Nancy explained carelessly. "And this," she added, turning to Montague, "is a friend of ours." She paused, as she saw the recognition between Dick and Montague. "Oh, do you know him?" she added.

"I think we do, don't we, old chap? In fact, anybody who has lived in Riversham during the last few months could hardly fail to know him, eh, Montague?"

"'Tisn't *my* fault I got to live there," was the reply, "an' *I* don't want everybody to know me. I don't

know them, an' I don't want to, some of 'em—they're nearly as bad as aunts," he added bitterly.

Mavis looked at Montague somewhat anxiously. Mr. Frampton seemed to hint at doings that had gained him notoriety. Was it possible that this troublesome boy could have been naughty to their "libation" friend? There was gentle reproach when she put the question to Montague, and the latter hung his head in shame when he remembered poaching expeditions with the blacksmith's son on Mr. Frampton's estate.

Mavis turned to Dick with a fat little sigh. "I don't *think* he means to be quite so naughty," she explained. "He hasn't been ti'some once since he's been with us. I s'pect it's Riversham makes him naughty."

"I expect that's it." Dick's voice was grave, and he hid his amusement at the motherly proprietorship in the child's voice. "However," he added, "Mont and I are the best of friends. Nothing really very terrible happened, you know."

Montague's eyes shone with gratitude to Dick for clearing his character (though he realized he scarcely deserved it) before Mavis.

"Yes, we *are* friends," he muttered, "and he's the only person in Riversham I'll be sorry to leave—'cept the blacksmith's son."

Nancy, remembering their neglected lunch, enquired whether Mr. Frampton had had any. No? Then would he join them? They had nearly finished, but

there was plenty left. Very readily Dick accepted the invitation. He explained, as he settled down to Mrs. White's good fare, that he had been too worried about some friends whom he had missed to bother about lunch.

"I thought you looked bothered about something when I saw you," Nancy exclaimed. "And didn't you find them?"

"Yes, I found them, but I spent the whole morning searching for them—can't think how I missed them."

Nancy wondered why, if he had found them he should still have looked worried, but she did not like to press the question.

"Are you having a holiday over here?" Montague enquired.

"Not exactly a holiday. I've just got a new job. I've been appointed Warden of the Hills."

"Warden of the Hills? How interesting that sounds!" Nancy said. "What does a warden have to do?"

"Keep an eye on the travellers in the neighbourhood. I suppose it would have been more correct if I had said Warden of the Travellers of the Hills."

"'Case they get into mischief, I s'pose?" Montague sighed.

"Well, that, of course. But more especially I have to place my car and myself at their disposal. If they need help or advice or guidance of any kind it's my job to be on the spot."

"What a ripping kind of life!" Billy exclaimed.

"But a little difficult," Nancy said thoughtfully.

"How can you know who's a traveller and who's a hill person? And how can you know when they're in trouble?"

"It's my job to find out," Dick replied. "Now you, for instance," he added carelessly, "are travellers, aren't you?"

"Yes," Billy replied guardedly. "But we're travellers with a donkey," he added.

Dick nodded. Yet, as it was clearly impossible for everybody to ride the donkey, he said, it was his duty as Warden to give some of them a lift.

"But we're not going your way." Nancy's voice expressed a wish that they were. "We want to see Gleambridge cathedral from the hills."

"That could be arranged quite easily," Dick replied. "I shall probably be going that way presently." He paused. It was not as easy as he had supposed to keep an eye on these little travellers. He wished to goodness he could persuade them to leave the donkey at the village opposite and let him take them about in the car. He made the suggestion diplomatically, baiting it with proposals that should have brought ready acceptance to the lips of little adventurers who wanted to see the world; wonderful descriptions he gave them of places they should see. They hesitated, of course. What else could they do when the sound of those places, their very names made you hot to see

them? The thought, too, of travelling with their "libation" friend—oh, it was hard to resist! Yet, when you had said "Travels with a donkey"? Besides, would flying about in a car really be adventuring? *Could* adventure find you in a car? Ah, no, they decided, cars belonged to the everyday world. And again, there was poor little Ladybird-Modestine. Imagine leaving her at an unknown stable. They shook their heads sorrowfully. Twice in one day to have had to refuse tempting proposals! Life, they began to think, was not as simply straightforward and easy as they had imagined it. There were decisions to be made. How curious that the difficulties should be kind of *nice* difficulties.

They compromised by promising to accept short lifts occasionally if Mr. Frampton happened to be going their way.

"You won't think it's because we wouldn't like to travel with you, will you?" Nancy asked. "But, you see—oh, it's not easy to explain."

"I quite understand," Dick assured her, for he had scarcely hoped that they would accept his offer. "Still, the car is there, remember, if ever you should need it—and so am I. Do you know," he continued, changing the subject, "I seem to have been smelling roses all the time. Is it my imagination?"

"No, it's real roses." Mavis unfolded her cloak and held out the roses for Dick to smell. "A Rose-Vicar gave us them."

“ A Rose-Vicar ? ”

They explained their meeting with him, and how he had taken them round his garden.

“ Ah, that accounts for it ! ” Dick’s face expressed the clearing up of some mystery.

“ ‘Counts for what ? ’ ” Nancy was mystified.

“ Oh—er—nothing much. But what on earth are you going to do with these glorious roses ? They’ll die in this heat.”

And then a bright idea came to Nancy. As Mr. Frampton was evidently going in the direction of the Priory, why not, instead of having them hanging about in the post all night, ask him to take them to the Prior ? Would it be too presumptuous ?

“ You said, didn’t you, that you had to help travellers ? ” she began somewhat hesitatingly.

“ Certainly I did,” Dick replied promptly. He listened hopefully.

“ Well, it’s the roses. Last night we stopped at a Priory and the Prior was so dear and kind to us—not a scrap preachy or religious, ’cept in a nice way, and the Priory rules are that you pay only what you put in the offertory-bag on Sundays, and, you see, if you’re children it’s so little.”

“ And we ate lots ! ” Billy interrupted.

“ Yes, we did, and Mrs. White, that’s a nurse who lives there, simply crammed our basket with that d’licious lunch we’ve eaten. But it’s not *only* that, it’s the Prior. He made us so happy and he’s lost his

little daughter, Dorothy, and we thought p'raps he'd like the roses for her grave, an' so, please, if you're going that way, would you mind taking them to him with our love and tell him they're for Dorothy? "

Now what was Dick to do? He had had no intention whatever of returning to the Priory. His idea was, since they would not travel in his car, to keep as close to them as possible without hampering them or interfering with that sense of freedom and adventure that was evidently so important to them. To be sure it would be a slow game; he would have to spend hours sitting in the car by the roadside, but what did that matter? It would all be part of *his* adventure? And now here was Nancy herself frustrating his plans, for how could he refuse her appeal? To be sure he could get to the Priory and back in a very short time; nevertheless, he would have been better satisfied not to have lost sight of them again.

However, the children must not know of the difficulty they had placed him in. Yes, certainly he would deliver them to the Prior with their message; better tuck them up in the car at once out of this scorching sun, he suggested. While he and Nancy wrapped them up in leaves and put them away in the car the others packed up the remains of the lunch—not that there was much to pack now! And then what next to do?

"Let's stay a little longer," Nancy suggested.

Why hurry? It was hot and they had been tramping

all the morning. And, after all, were they not now in the very heart of the hills, with hills and hills and hills unfolding all around them? And here, too, was a companion who didn't worry you with questions, who accepted just what you chose to tell him, who, in fact, seemed to think it the most natural thing in the world that you should want to seek adventure; should want to explore. And how interesting he was; different from the Prior, of course. The latter raced you all over the world at a delightfully breathless speed; Mr. Frampton told you jolly things about Oxford; he took you, too, to France and Switzerland and Italy. This Wardenship job, they thought, must be his first one, perhaps a kind of holiday job to help towards his Oxford expenses, for evidently he was returning there in the autumn. However, they could not question him; besides, they were too interested listening to the stories he had to tell them of funny little out-of-the-way places in Switzerland and Italy, of people and grottos and glaciers and mountains. Oh, would they *ever* grow up, Billy groaned, and be able to see for themselves? The world seemed to be simply chock full of interest, and you had just to sit quietly at home and wait.

"Will there be time to get it *all* in before we're old?" he sighed.

Heaps of time, Dick assured him (as to the "sitting quietly at home," he said nothing, but smiled). The years would slip away. Why, it seemed only the other

day that he himself was a boy of their age—getting into all sorts of mischief, he added, with a smile for Montague.

“An’ living with an aunt who only liked good boys?”

“Well, no, but even parents can’t stand too much mischief, you know. They sometimes wonder how you ever came to be their child.”

“Do they?” Montague asked with interest. “’Spect boys’d get on best without any grown-ups at all,” he added. “Then nobody’d be worried—not the grown-ups or the boys.”

“Boarding-school,” Dick replied thoughtfully, “isn’t a bad place, you know.”

“I’m going to boarding-school next term,” Billy announced proudly.

“Wish I could come with you,” Montague muttered. “Then my guardian wouldn’t have to learn about boys and how to be a parent to them. Guess he’ll have his hands full enough with Jocelyne.”

If only this might happen, and if he might return with Billy to Nestcombe for the holidays, life would indeed be worth living.

However, the hours were slipping away, and here they were forgetting the world that lay before them. They made their preparations for departure hastily.

“If you’re taking the Gleambridge road you must keep to the left,” Dick said. “You’ll get down into a valley again a little further on, then you’ll come to a

village called Barsdon. Why not stay the night there—or had you any other plans ? ”

They confessed that nothing definite had been arranged. They had not decided whether to sleep out of doors or to find some cottage. Did Mr. Framp-ton think there would be a nice one at Barsdon ?

“ I know the very place,” was Dick’s reply. “ Look here, leave Modestine at the inn—it’s this end of the village—then keep straight on, and at the corner of the next street you’ll find a cottage standing back from the road. A Mrs. Charsfield lives there ; just tell her I’ve sent you and she’ll take you in.”

They thanked him, and, with a wave of the hand, set off in the direction indicated.

“ See you again soon, perhaps ! ” they shouted.

“ Quite soon, I hope,” Dick called in reply. “ I’ll be in Barsdon this evening. Look out for me ! ” Reluctantly he turned towards his car. “ Wish I could go with them now,” he thought. “ They’re such little people to wander about alone—and so trusting. However, they’re pretty independent, so probably no harm will come to them.”

CHAPTER XI

THE FIGHT

MEANWHILE, the children were travelling towards Barsdon. They were in high spirits, for the long rest had refreshed them, while the invigorating air exhilarated them. There was no shade whatever now from the heat of the sun, but what did that matter when the hill air swept through you? It set your feet dancing along the road, and the miles would have been left swiftly behind had not Modestine willed otherwise.

“Can’t you feel it dancing through you, Modestine?” Nancy expostulated. “Anybody’d think you were an old lady of about a hundred to see you plodding along.”

To this and other entreaties Modestine turned a deaf ear. Why hurry over the hills, she seemed to say—it was the hills you wanted to come to, well, here they are. And wasn’t it views you wanted? Well, where can you hope to find anything more beautiful than the country that is sweeping in hill and dale around you? Adventure you ask for? Well, let adventure come over the hills to meet you; why go forth to seek it? Oh, Modestine, you who have youth in your veins, do you not know that youth cannot

stand still? It is old age, Modestine, that sits with folded hands awaiting that which may happen.

On and on over the hills, each child taking a turn with the troublesome little animal while the others raced on ahead. Then, in the late afternoon they came to the road that led down into the valley.

Nancy offered to ride Modestine down the hill, and the others decided to have a race. Montague was for giving Mavis a start, but Billy advised him not to.

"She'd leave you a mile behind, nobody can run as fast as Mavis. 'Sides, it's too far to have a proper race; let's run just as we want to, and never mind about winning."

Montague agreed to this, for the thought of being beaten by a little girl was not pleasant, especially when you wanted to shine yourself in the eyes of that small person.

"We'll wait for you at the bottom, Nancy," Mavis shouted, "'nless Modestine changes her mind and decides to run, too!"

"All right," Nancy replied, waving her hand as, with a shout, they set off down the hill.

Modestine's gentle amble fitted in with her mood. She was in no hurry to leave the hill top, and now that she was alone the imagination part of her gently pushed aside the everyday, practical side of her nature and led her across this lovely hill country. And presently she began to feel no longer a stranger in a strange land; seeing the hills with her imagination

eyes she began to feel *near* to them. Would she some day understand them as she did her own dear forest and river? The shouts and laughter of the other children coming distantly seemed to be a part of the joyousness of the hills. The hills, she told herself fancifully, were laughter. The winds that blew across them voiced that laughter, and she and the others were just little wild creatures of the earth who echoed the laughter brimming all around them.

She no longer questioned the hills as she jogged happily down the road. She wanted to laugh, but to laugh alone would be too stupid she thought, so instead, a song that Aunt Letty had taught her bubbled from her lips :

“ I will arise and go now and go to Inisfree,
And a small cabin build there of clay and wattles made
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.”

“ I’d love the bee-loud glade,” she thought, “ but I don’t *think* I’d live alone—I couldn’t just talk to bees *all* day.”

She continued humming the song.

“ And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes
dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the
cricket sings ;
There midnight’s all a glimmer and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.”

“ I’ve seen a *blue* glow,” Nancy thought, ‘ but not a purple one. And it was swallows’ wings the evening

was full of, last night, not linnets'. 'Spect the man who wrote that would have made a song last night if he'd been with us in the Priory garden. I think I'll try to make one myself about—about the swallows and children picking up the joy-drops splashed about by a Prior. I'd like to stop and write it now—'spect I'd better not. They would think I was lost, so

"I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore ;
While I stand in the roadway, or on the pavements grey
I hear it in the deep heart's core."

Nancy suddenly pulled up Modestine sharply. In spite of her delight in the hills, all day she had felt that there was something missing. Now, as she sang of one whose heart ached for the sound of water while he trod the dull pavements of London, she suddenly knew what was lacking in this hill country.

"Oh," she thought passionately, "it's the sound of the dear old Gleam I miss. I can hear it in my heart's core, I can hear the tide coming in, I can hear the wind playing with the waves."

How she loved water, how even the memory of the sound of it stirred her. With a laugh at herself she shook the reins and Modestine jogged slowly on. Nancy's thoughts wandered back to the song she had been singing. Curious how little the words had conveyed to her until to-day ; singing it here in the hills had made it alive for her.

"I shall call it my Hill Song," she told herself. "I'll tell Aunt Letty about it."

Ah no, she could not do that she remembered, for since Aunt Letty had ceased to be engaged to Uncle Jim she had not sung it, for it was one that he had given her. Nancy remembered too how they used to laugh over the song together.

"Nine lovely scenty bean rows they were going to have between them," she sighed, "and we were all going to stay with them in the little clay cabin, though Uncle Jim said it might end in some of us having to sleep in the bee-loud glade, else we'd be a bit congested."

Ah yes, *that* verse had always been "alive." Nancy sighed as she remembered the happy days when Aunt Letty had sung it.

"I wish," she thought, "people wouldn't go and be miserable and not marry when they really want to—it's so worrying. I do wish I could let Uncle Jim know Aunt Letty wants him—I *know* he'd come like a shot."

A bend in the road showed her that the foot of the hill was near; the children, scampering along, had almost reached it. Crossing the valley was a little ford, and near the water Nancy could see a couple of big lads crouching one on either side of the road. She strained forward, puzzled as to what they could possibly be doing. Instinctively she felt that they were up to no good. A moment later she knew.

Mavis, who, of course, was the first to reach the

ford, disregarding the stepping-stones, was about to leap over it when the lads pulled a rope they had stretched across the road. Nancy saw the child trip and fall full length across the ford. Fortunately the water was shallow, but Nancy in her anger and indignation, and fearing that her little sister might be hurt, cried out so fiercely that Modestine literally bounded down the hill.

Mavis, with her handkerchief held to her pretty shapely little nose, ran towards her with tears in her eyes.

"It's my nose that's bleeding, an' my dress is all filthy and muddy—nasty, horrid boys!"

"Beastly skunking cads!" Nancy's words expressed what she was feeling as she slipped from Modestine to comfort the child. "But see, Billy's settling them, and Monty's helping!"

Billy, indeed, was "settling them."

"You rotten dirty hounds!" he cried. "Come on!"

"Ought we to—to let them fight? They're ever so much bigger than Billy and Monty," Mavis sobbed.

"We can't stop Billy, you know we can't, once he begins. And he does know about proper fighting, and I daresay they don't."

Billy, usually so sunny tempered, so good-natured, was a difficult person to deal with once his slow temper was roused, and that it was thoroughly roused to-day was evident. Both he and Montague had witnessed the cowardly trick played on Mavis, though they were too far off to save her.



Nancy and Mavis cling together watching the fight

"We'll take one each," he had cried, as together they dashed forward. "I'll take that biggest lout——"

"No, me—I'll take the biggest." Montague was just one fierce desire to hurt terribly those who had hurt his little friend.

"No—me!" Billy panted. "I can fight."

"So can I," Montague persisted.

Billy, however, was quickest, and made for the taller lad, who stood waiting with a smile of derision on his face, for the small boy dashing on to him with a challenge bursting angrily from his lips.

Nancy and Mavis clung together watching the fight. Each boy had thrown off his coat and was fighting desperately. Montague slogged into and pummelled his opponent, but, though all his passionate young heart was in the fight, it was clearly not a fair one. Billy, on the other hand, to his adversary's evident surprise and chagrin, was by no means getting the worst of it, for, thanks to his father, who had taught him both boxing and Ju Jitsu, he had science to help him, whereas the country lad had nothing but brute strength. Every movement of Billy's lithe young body was prejudged, every thrust was true. Presently, watching his opportunity, with a sudden swift movement of arm and leg, he brought his opponent heavily to the ground. The lad lay on the ground howling with rage and pain, but as he made no effort to renew the contest Billy left him and ran to Montague's assistance.

“ Go away !” Montague panted. “ *I’ll manage him !*”

Billy hesitated. Clearly Montague could *not* manage the lad, yet, understanding his spirit, he was loth to interfere. The lad, however, decided the matter. Through the tail of his eye he had watched Billy’s performance, and was in no mind to suffer the treatment the youngster had meted out to his confederate, so with a last cuff at Montague’s head he slunk away.

The four coats lay jumbled together at the side of the ford. The lad lurched towards them, picked up his own and was about to turn away when something lying on the ground near Billy’s attracted his attention. He glanced round furtively. Nobody was watching him so, stooping hurriedly, he picked up what he had seen, and, thrusting it into his pocket, called his companion and bolted. Something in his voice aroused the latter, and, pausing only for his coat, he, too, slunk away and the children were once more alone.

The next quarter of an hour was a busy time for Nancy, what with Mavis’ bleeding nose and two gory and dishevelled boys to be attended to.

“ It’s my fwock I mind more’n my nose,” Mavis said pathetically, while Nancy was bathing the latter with the clear water from the ford. “ It’s a horrid, muddy patch, and I’ll be the only dirty one now.” For Mrs. White had seen to it that Montague started out that morning with spotless clothes.

It would probably brush off, Nancy assured her, when it was dry, and, having done the best she could

for Mavis, she turned her attention to the boys.

Poor Montague was a sorry spectacle, and Billy was little better. Nancy washed away the blood and cleansed the broken skin, but for the bruises she could do nothing.

Billy, who had regained his happy spirits, began to laugh at himself and Montague.

"We don't look handsome, either of us, but we'll just have to pull our hats down over our eyes and glare at anybody who stares at us!"

Montague, however, was unaccountably silent, and it was not until they had started off again and Barsdon was in sight that he voiced his trouble.

"Billy beat the fellow he was fighting an' *I* didn't," he rumbled in a voice so low that they could scarcely hear it. "But," he added, and here apparently lay the sting, "he needn't have offered to help me." Oh, it was like gall to have your pride so wounded when you felt just one fierce, primitive impulse to hurt the cad who had injured Mavis.

"Oh, but, Monty, you were awfully brave!" Mavis cried impulsively. "Billy, you see, has been taught how to fight—but look how you slogged into that creature! I 'spect he had some bruises."

"Was he *bleeding*?" Montague asked hopefully.

"Yes, he was," Mavis replied with a little shudder.

"Bleeding as much as me?"

"Well—nearly," Mavis temporized.

Montague's face cleared. Mavis had said that he

was brave, and if she thought well of him nothing else mattered. Nevertheless he found himself longing for the day when he could fight as Billy had done, and when Billy offered either to teach him boxing himself "when they got home" (how persistently that little phrase seemed to crop up!), or to ask his father to do so, Montague's momentary bitterness vanished, and he began to take an interest in life again.

And now the village was reached, and the children began to look about for the inn. They saw the sign swinging slightly in the breeze a short way down the street, but at the entrance to the village was something more attractive in children's eyes than an inn, and that was a sweet shop.

Suddenly, Billy, who was feeling parched and thirsty after the fight, felt an overwhelming desire for acid drops.

"I haven't bought my weekly sweets yet," he said. "I should think we could spare twopence, couldn't we?"

The others agreeing that twopence would not be an impossible extravagance, Billy entered the tiny shop and Nancy accompanied him.

"I've got threepence loose in my pocket," he whispered, "but hadn't I better change half a crown? I may want the coppers to tip the ostler at the inn."

Nancy nodded and Billy dived into his coat pocket for his purse, but no purse was to be found. The poor boy's face went white.

"Nancy, I can't find the purse," he whispered hurriedly. "I put it in this pocket, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. Let me feel," Nancy replied anxiously. She slipped her hand into his pocket, but could find no purse ; she felt in all his other pockets, but in none of them was a purse to be found.

So far the woman who was serving them had not noticed their consternation, for she had been busy digging out the acid drops, but now as she handed the sweets to Billy she was struck by the two white, agitated little faces. Was anything the matter, she enquired kindly ? Were they ill ?

"No, thank you," Billy replied in confusion. "It's—it's nothing very much."

His fingers trembled as they extricated two pennies from the usual medley a boy's trousers pocket contains, but he was too proud to share his trouble with a total stranger. Fearing further questions he flung the money down and hurried out of the shop.

"Let's get into a side road quick," he said, "so I can take my coat off and shake it."

Mavis and Montague looked at him in surprise, and Nancy explained matters as they hurried after Billy.

Suddenly Mavis paused and called to Billy.

"Oh, Billy," she said, her voice trembling with indignation, "I know who's got it—it's that wicked boy, the one who fought Monty. I saw him pick up something, and I 'member he looked kind of scared—oh, I know it's him !"

The children looked at each other. No use to hurry now in order to turn the coat inside out, it was all too

evident that Mavis was right, and that a search would be fruitless.

"I've just one penny left," Billy replied simply. "Now what is to be done?"

"I've got some money!" Montague dived into his pocket and produced fivepence-halfpenny.

"An' I've twopence in my pocket!" said Nancy.

"An' I've twopence, too, in mine!" Mavis added.

Tenpence-halfpenny all told! What a sum for four little people to face the world with. Well, no use taking Modestine to the inn now; impossible, too, to present yourselves as prospective boarders at Mrs. Charsfield's pretty cottage (they knew it at once from Dick's description) with only tenpence-halfpenny in your pockets.

They turned reluctantly up a narrow lane and even Billy's heart was heavy within him. Here they were, four children and a donkey in unknown country, almost penniless. The thought of sleeping out of doors, of course did not trouble them; but for Dick's suggestion they would probably have slept out to-night in any case. But to sleep out of doors from choice was one thing, to sleep out because you had only the price of one very meagre meal between you was something quite different.

And then what a tremendous sum of money to have lost! Practically seventeen shillings, for, thanks to well-filled baskets, their expenses during the two days had been very small. And seventeen shil-

lings was a small fortune in the eyes of these children, whose weekly pocket-money was limited because their parents held the belief that the modern habit of giving the child an unlimited allowance robbed it of a certain happiness that is known only to those children who have to think twice before they indulge themselves. A blasé child who was unable to enjoy the simple pleasures they had taught their children to enjoy was the pet abomination of Mr. and Mrs. Stafford, and the children's little hoard of nineteen shillings had been the result of much combined savings of presents from relatives, saved, not originally for this adventure, but "Just in *case* we should want to do anything nice with it."

And now it had gone, every penny of it, and if they were to continue their travels they would have to contrive some means of raising money. To be sure there was Mr. Frampton, and to whom should you turn if not to the Warden of the Travellers in the Hills? If they hung about the village they would be sure to meet him presently; he would be glad to see them they knew, but, well, if they confided in him would he not either advise them to return home or else offer to pay their expenses himself?

"I don't see how we *can* tell him," Billy said. "It'd look like cadging."

"But he said he had to help travellers. Wouldn't he be hurt if we didn't let him help us in some way—not to *give* us money, of course, but just, but just——"

"There'd be *no* way he could help us out of this

'cept with money or paying for us everywhere, which would be the same thing," Billy persisted. "And I'm sure he's not meant to help in that way if he is Warden—it's lifts and accidents and things of that kind he's here for. We've got to find a way out ourselves or go back home."

And so the matter was left while they looked about for a camping place. Presently, a wood at the end of a narrow cart-track on the right seemed to suggest itself, and here they decided to spend the night. Their spirits began to rise a little as they entered the wood. After all, there was an excitement about camping out of doors, and they would build a fire and have tea. Tea? How stupid, why had nobody thought of buying a loaf in Barsdon? They could at least run to that. Billy volunteered to go back and buy one while the others were unpacking. Bread and acid drops for tea, and the scraps left over from lunch! They laughed at the novelty of the fare. They began to think after all, their plight was not so utterly desperate while even a few pence stood between them and—well, not perhaps starvation, but giving up that which they had set their hearts upon.

"We'll find a way out," Billy called back to them, "so don't any of you worry!" He paused as he reached the road. "Guess we'll have to call it part of our adventure; it's the kind of thing that adventurers have to put up with, isn't it?" and with a laugh he set off down the hill.

CHAPTER XII

"FAIREST MASONS"

BILLY did not take long to fetch the bread. He arrived at the wood in a somewhat breathless condition.

"I ran," he explained, "'cos I saw Mr. Frampton's car outside the inn."

Nancy was troubled. She wished Billy did not think it so necessary to avoid him. She was quite sure *she* would have lingered rather than hurried if she had known he was near, for after the troubles of the afternoon a grown-up friend would have been so comforting. Besides, he had evidently hoped to meet them in Barsdon. To be sure they had not promised anything definite, but Nancy was quite sure that he would be disappointed at missing them.

"Billy, *do* say that if he comes this way we may stop him," she pleaded. "We needn't tell him about the purse."

Billy, after she had pointed out her reasons, agreed.

"He's sure *not* to come though—that lane would be the limit for a car."

Meanwhile, tea, such as it was, awaited them. They divided up the remains of the lunch before they

attacked the loaf, as they would need as much of the latter as their present hunger would allow for breakfast. Acid drops, they found, filled up corners, though everyone still owned to a dreadful thirst after the meal was finished. Further up the hill they could see the chimneys of a cottage, and the boys volunteered to go for water, while the girls were unpacking blankets ready for the night. A whole brimming, welcome pailful they brought on their return, and after they had drunk their fill and had replenished the lemonade bottle there was still a deep draught for poor little Modestine, who sighed her contentment when she had sucked up the last cool drop.

Then, after the pail had been returned, they sat round and discussed things. Wonderful what a difference a meal makes. On the other side of it there had been terror for some of them at the thought of their penniless condition; now, with bread and acid drops between them and their loss, they could turn their thoughts from it and think only of how best to overcome the difficulty.

“If we could spare a penny for tin-tacks,” Montague said, “I could make some little picture-frames out of that young elm-wood over there. I used to make frames for Jocelyne and me for our cigarette cards in Suffolk, but she’s too grown-up for them now. I could use a stone for a hammer.”

“Oh, and I’ve thought of something!” Mavis cried. “I can run in a race!”

“ Run in a race ? ” Nancy repeated.

“ Yes. While you and Billy were in the sweet shop, Monty and me were reading a bill in the window about a Flower Show at Barsdon. It’s to-morrow, and there’s a race for little girl visitors, *an’ the prize is seven and sixpence !* ”

Seven and sixpence ! Why, it was a fortune ! But would Mavis mind running ? Of course she would get the prize.

“ Yes, I’ll do it,” Mavis replied. “ But can we spare sixpence for the entrance fee ? ”

Certainly they could. The loaf had cost fourpence and that left them with sixpence-halfpenny. Mavis should have the sixpence, and the halfpenny—well, one *could* not ask for a halfpennyworth of tin-tacks ; they must be bought after the race ; nevertheless, the halfpenny must not be despised ; it was something, they felt, to have at least that to face the world with.

Everybody’s spirits rose considerably. With the almost certain prospect of seven-and-sixpence in view what was there to worry about now ? Seven-and-sixpence, carefully spent, would last a long time, especially if they gave up all idea of sleeping in cottages. Was not a blanket in a wood or near a haystack good enough for anybody ? Would you not be robbing yourselves of many adventurous hours if you slept under a stuffy roof when the big night-world awaited you ?

Montague returned to the subject of the frames,

He would prepare them, he said, in the morning ; it would take very little time to tack them together later in the day.

“Some day,” he added, looking at Mavis, “I’ll make you some for your dolls’ house. Would you like them?”

For her dolls’ house? Indeed she would. With the mention of the dolls’ house a shadow crossed the little girl’s mind. It suddenly seemed so long since she had played with it; since she had touched any of her dear toys. It would be so nice—but, with a little sigh, she pushed the regret away from her.

Nancy began to think of sleeping arrangements.

“Shall we just sleep on the ground?” she asked. “Nicolette, you remember, builded herself a lodge of leaves and branches.”

“Who’s Nicolette?” Montague enquired.

“Nicolette? Oh, she’s in a book. She and Aucassin were in love with each other, only he’s a king’s son and she’s poor, so they can’t marry at first. *We* think Aucassin a bit of a muff—he weeps too much, but Nicolette was brave. She had all sorts of adventures and she lived in a wood.”

“She had a much worse time than we’ve had,” Billy interrupted. “Prisons and all sorts of things.”

“Yes, she did. But she escaped and builded the lodge of saplings and made a tapestry of leaves and flowers. There’s *such* a pretty picture of her building it in Aunt Letty’s book.”

" Does an aunt let you read her books—*touch* 'em ? " Montague enquired with awe.

" Why, of course she does ! We all go into her room on Sunday mornings and have lots of fun. Sometimes she tells us stories, but if she's sleepy then we each have a book. You have to have *very* clean hands 'cos it's generally her special books you like best."

Montague stared in silence. This Aunt Letty of whom they talked so much sounded so altogether different from his conception of an aunt that he found it difficult to picture her. Indeed, if she had not been an aunt he might almost have felt enough interest in her to wish to see her some day.

" An' you *like* going into her room ? " he asked presently. " Why, of course ! " Mavis spoke a little impatiently. " She's our Aunt Letty ! " So tiresome of Monty not to understand what that implied.

Again Montague grew silent. Would he want to go to *his* aunt's room ? Would she want him ? Wouldn't she be horrified if he touched any of her possessions ? And this aunt played with them—that meant there might be a noise in the house before breakfast.

" If there's a noise comes from my room before eight o'clock, well, I know it ! " he growled.

Poor Montague ! How different his life had been from theirs, they thought, and, until they had met him, they had simply accepted all the love and happiness that made up their days as their natural right. Now they were beginning to wonder—a little.

However, they were straying from the point; sleeping arrangements had not yet been decided. Montague voted eagerly for the lodge, or bower, for the girls; he and Billy would build them one—one as good as Nicolette's. But she and Nancy must help, too, Mavis declared; the boys could make the framework of boughs while she and Nancy wove a tapestry of leaves.

Now indeed was sleeping out of doors transformed into an adventure. Romance, with the building of that bower that was to rival fair Nicolette's, entered into the little wood; each in their different way felt it as they gathered armfuls of dry bracken or cut down slender saplings; but Montague most of all. To build a bower for Mavis! Why, it was like being a knight serving a princess. And he would guard her; he would sleep near her door presently and guard her from enemies just as a real knight would do. Not for a moment would he compare himself with Aucassin, who sat at home and wept; he was sure, however, that Nicolette was not more fairly beautiful than *his* little princess. "Fairest mason," Nancy said they called Nicolette in the book; well, that was what Mavis was, he thought stoutly, as he watched her artistic little fingers skilfully weaving a covering of leaves for the framework. "Very pretty it was and very dainty and well furnished, both outside and in, with a tapestry of flowers and of leaves." That, Nancy said, was Nicolette's bower. Yes, but nobody,

not Nicolette herself (though she did turn out to be a princess after all) could wish for a daintier bower than this that had been “ builded ” by four modern children who knew how to find romance or adventure in the most trivial incident.

Time had passed rapidly during the building of the lodge. Evening was coming on, yet, though the trees shut out much of the daylight, it was still too light for them to sleep. And now that their preparations for the night were completed they all began to realize how very, very tired they were. The girls lay down in their dainty bower, and the boys sprawled together on a bed of bracken outside, yet nobody felt that bedtime had come. The evening was so warm that blankets were not needed yet ; indeed, had it not been for an occasional breeze, the girls would have found their lodge almost stifling.

Though they could not sleep everybody was too tired to bother to talk. Nancy’s imagination, scarcely ever at rest, carried her to Nestcombe and Nestley. Suddenly, a great longing for the familiar places swept over her. Their playroom, the paddock, the garden with its beloved trees, the high wall at the bottom of the garden, where they so often sat and gazed across the river—the river itself. How dear every corner of the home-place was. And yet, when they had had home all around them they had accepted it just as they accepted the love and happiness that was theirs. Why should coming to the hills awaken

your heart to these things? When you were in the Land of your Desire, oh, it was curious that home should jostle that longed-for country into the background. And then there was the forest that would not let you forget it. Nancy closed her eyes, and saw it as it would be now in the twilight hour and in her imagination she listened to the great silence that was as much a part of the forest as the trees themselves. A wonderful silence that was filled with little still sounds and whispers, the stirring of night things, the breathing of sleepers, oh, a friendly, home-like silence. She seemed to hear too the sharp metallic clot-clot of the horse's hoofs ringing on the forest road—that, too, was simply part of the friendly silence.

And then again there was the smoke from the lime kilns high up in the forest, yes, and the smell of the smoke, the smell of the forest, oh, it was all home. What comfort even in the thought of those forest scents and sounds. To be sure, there was a whispering here amongst the tree-tops, yet it was not the familiar whispering of the forest; there was, indeed, almost a loneliness about it. Yes, deep in her heart Nancy owned to loneliness (Mavis, too, was feeling it, Nancy knew from the way the little fingers clung to hers), and remembering the troubles of the evening—she had forgotten the prospective seven-and-sixpence—disappointment came to keep the loneliness company. These hills that they had come out to see with hope so high in their hearts, what had they offered them

more than the forest? They were lovely, oh yes; this afternoon they had seemed all laughter, but what a long, long time ago that seemed. And was there not a kind of mockery in the laughter? Would the forest, if children had come adventuring into its heart as they had come to the hills, would the forest have been so cruel? To offer so much, to pretend to take you right into its secret heart, then to thrust you out again. Ah, surely the forest would not do that!

And yet, and yet, there was Monty. What had the forest given to him? Wasn't it there, at the foot of the forest, that he had been so unhappy? Love abounded for them up and down the forest, besides in their own home, but Monty—why, wasn't it here in the hills that he was finding happiness? Wasn't there a kind of different look about him—something Nancy did not in the least know how to describe except by the word "happiness." Though his poor little body had been so battered about, some other more important part was receiving healing.

What an April girl was Nancy, what a child of moods. Disappointment and depression left her when she arrived at this stage in her reflections. She sat up suddenly and peeped out of the bower.

"Monty, tell me again what your guardian said about courage and life?" she demanded.

"He said, 'it's not life that matters, but the courage you bring to it,' an' he said he'd have to make a personal application of that sentence when he'd got

Jocelyne and me living with him. *I dunno* what he means."

"Do you think, Billy," Nancy said, "it means *us* an' our travels? Could it mean that we mustn't mind losing our money?"

Yes, Billy replied, that certainly was his interpretation of the quotation. Not to mind things going wrong, or, at least, not to be turned from your purpose by the first difficulties that arose, that in his eyes was courage. Nevertheless, Billy was feeling somewhat uncomfortable in his mind. Ought they, he was wondering, to go on? If he had been alone he would have had no doubts or hesitations; little setbacks could not even have suggested giving in. But there were the girls. Was it fair to ask them to go on, perhaps to face worse things than had happened this afternoon? He even had a slight twinge of conscience concerning Mavis running in the race; he would have preferred to run himself, but he knew quite well that there was less certainty of him carrying off the much needed prize—besides, the race was for little girls. Yet, what ought he to do?

"I've been thinking," he blurted out presently. "If there's anyone of us doesn't want to go on, if—if anybody would rather go home, I'll send that telegram to the Prior to-morrow, or if we see Mr. Frampton ask him to take us home. If *one* goes then we'll all go. Let's decide now at once."

Nobody spoke a word in reply.

“ Say quick if you’d like to go home. I’ll not blame anybody if you do—you’ve been so plucky all the time, and I promise I’ll never say you weren’t sports not to go on. Which shall we do, Nancy ? ”

It was sleepy little Mavis, however, who decided.

“ Let’s wait until after the race, an’ if I don’t win the prize, then we’d better go home, hadn’t we ? ”

“ But you know you’ll win it. You always do ! ”

“ Well then, if we’ve got seven-and-sixpence we’ll be rich, and it’ll be all right.”

Billy sighed with relief, and again silence fell between them. And again their thoughts went wandering. To the hills and the big open world ? No, not when the night is pushing loneliness towards you.

“ When the young eyes of the day
 Open on the dusk, and see
 All the shadows fade away
 Till the sun shines merrily,
 Then I leave my bed and run
 Out to frolic in the sun.
 Through the sunny hours I play
 Where the grass is warm and long ;
 I pluck the daisies, and the gay
 Buttercups, or join the song
 Of the birds that here and there
 Sing upon the sunny air.
 But when night comes, cold and slow,
 When the sad moon climbs the sky,
 When the whispering wind says, ‘ Boh,
 Little Boy,’ and makes me cry,
 By my mother I am led
 To my home and to my bed.”

The daylight called them to the Unknown, but the night sounds whispered in each little adventurer’s

heart the one word "Mother." Just to see her, how comforting it would be. Yet, though they longed for her, none of them, not even Nancy, had yet awakened to *her* point of view—that awakening was to come later.

In Montague's heart, too, there must have been loneliness, for, presently, the other three heard a small voice speaking :

"I wish I had a mother."

He voiced his need so simply that the children's hearts ached for him. He should share their mother, Mavis said kindly, and never go back to that horrid aunt.

"There's three of you," Montague replied sadly ;
"she wouldn't have room for me."

Well, there was Aunt Letty. Now that she wasn't going to be married she would have lots of room for him. He could be her little boy.

"If she wasn't an *aunt*," Montague murmured doubtfully.

"She can't help being an aunt, you know, Monty dear," Nancy replied gently.

"No, an' I'd *like* you to love her," Mavis added.

"If I could think of her as *not* an aunt p'raps I might like her a little." Could he, even for Mavis, overcome his prejudice? Well, if she wished it he must certainly try.

Silence again and then, at last, the gentle breathing of four sleeping children.

For an hour perhaps they slept. Suddenly, their dreams were disturbed by a terrific sobbing sound—

the sobbing of giants, it seemed. They awoke with a start to find that Modestine, who was used to either a comfortable stable or roaming at large in the paddock, was voicing her disapproval of her night-quarters, voicing it as only a donkey knows how. Billy sleepily admonished her.

" Come over here if you're feeling as bad as all that, but for goodness' sake don't make that row again," he said.

Sleep did not come again immediately, and while they were still lying awake the sound of a car in the lane broke on their ears. Then such a honking of a horn as they had never heard before! Honk, honk, honk, honk! The Barsdon people must have heard it and wondered, but the children did not wonder for they knew!

" Mr. Frampton! It's him!" they cried in one voice, and, being now wide awake, they sprang up and ran along the cart-track to the road.

Honk, honk, honk, honk!

Slowly, very slowly the car drew near.

" It's us he's honking for!" Nancy cried, and there was relief in her voice. "'Spect he heard Modestine, so knew where we were."

They stood where Dick could not fail to see them and waited breathlessly for the creeping car. At last it was here!

" Mr. Frampton! Oh, Mr. Frampton, we're so glad to see you," Nancy cried. " Have you been looking for us?"

Now, Dick was feeling both worried and annoyed. Worried because he had searched the country for miles, and could find no trace of the children until he heard Modestine's voice; annoyed because they had not waited for him in Barsdon. Even if they had decided to sleep out of doors after all, they might have let him know, he argued with himself, knowing nothing of the lost purse. To be sure they had not promised, yet in the afternoon they had seemed so friendly, so glad of his company that he could not understand their action. And he was quite prepared when he sighted his elusive charges to show his annoyance, but the reproach that was on his lips was checked by something in the children's voices. He was quite sure there was relief in their eager, welcoming shout; something in their attitude, too, as they stood there in the moonlight seemed to suggest forlornness. What could have happened? As he sprang from the car he noticed the boys' puffy, battered faces. Ah, there had been a fight, that was it; the details he would find out diplomatically later on.

"We did so hope you would come this way," Nancy said.

"But why didn't you wait for me in Barsdon?"

"We—couldn't," Billy replied awkwardly. "But we were awfully sorry not to."

Dick noticed his confusion but let the subject drop for the time being. Well, never mind, he said, but now could they tell him how to dispose of the car; clearly

it could not be left in the road all night. They showed him the gate leading into the cart-track and he backed the car through it.

“ Aren’t you going to sleep at the inn ? ” Nancy asked, as he followed them into the wood.

“ I’m not ! ” Dick replied decidedly. Lose sight of them now that, after his long search, he had found them ? Not if he could help it ! “ I’m sleeping here. Besides, the inn is closed—it’s nearly half-past eleven, and, do you know, I’m hungry, dreadfully hungry. I’ve had nothing to eat since that excellent lunch you gave me, and I shall have to ask you to take pity on me again.”

The children flushed uncomfortably. The thought of offering dry bread to someone who had evidently gone without his dinner, in order to keep what he had considered an appointment with them, who had apparently spent hours searching for them, was humiliating. And it was all they had for breakfast ! Well, they would have to go without any, for a Warden who was so conscientious in looking after travellers must certainly be fed.

“ I—I’m sorry we’ve nothing to go with it,” Nancy faltered, as she handed him the portion of loaf that was left. “ We ate everything else up.”

Dick smiled to himself at what he supposed was simply a happy-go-lucky kind of housekeeping and wondered whether they had even given a thought to breakfast. He accepted the bread gratefully, how-

ever ; he was too hungry, he assured them, to need luxuries, in fact, never had anything tasted more delicious, and his enjoyment as he munched steadily through the loaf was apparent to the children.

“ I am indebted to you little people for two meals,” he laughed apologetically as he dug his teeth into the last crust. “ To-morrow, please, it’s *my* turn, and if you don’t let me be responsible for the catering for the whole day I shall be more than hurt. Is it a bargain ? ”

How could they refuse such an offer ? In making it Dick had not the remotest idea that otherwise they would have been foodless, that he himself had eaten their very last crust. Yet, for a moment Billy eyed him suspiciously. Could he possibly know that they were penniless ? In the ordinary course of events he would simply have accepted Dick’s offer without further thought, but poverty, unfortunately, has a way of making you think. Sixpence-halfpenny between you and charity was a miserable sum to a proud young person like Billy, and his thoughts of the lad who had stolen their money were by no means gentle. That Dick might have helped them recover the lost purse, had they confided in him, never occurred to him. The purse was gone, and that was the end of the matter.

Dick, meanwhile, had finished the last crumb and was feeling in his pocket for his pipe.

“ By Jove ! ” he exclaimed, “ what an ass I am ! Your Prior has sent you some chocolates—I’d forgotten them ! ”

He produced four huge packets of chocolate. The children were glad of it, for being awake, they found, made you hungry. And how nice to be able to offer Mr. Frampton something more than dry bread ! How grateful they were to the Prior.

And while they all munched, Dick told them how overwhelmed the Prior had been at the thought behind their gift. An unrepayable and unforgettable gift, he had said, and Nancy could just picture him saying it. She wanted to question Dick further about their kind friend, but seeing Mavis' sleepy little face he insisted on bed for them all immediately.

“ We can talk to-morrow,” he said, “ so now good-night ! ”

And now they really settled down finally for the night. How comforting, Nancy thought, as she snuggled down with Mavis in the bower, how comforting to have a grown-up person near at hand (Dick was sleeping in the car) ; what a difference it made to the night-sounds ! Somehow, all the loneliness vanished and Nancy was aware only of the beauty of the stars in the blue vaulted sky. Stars seen through tree-tops and you a little atom in the arms of Mother Earth ! What a discovery, what an adventure in an unknown world of beauty for an imaginative child.

“ Thank you, God,” she murmured drowsily, “ for the lovely star-world.” And the Prior, I think, would not have called *that* little prayer “ the gabbling of empty words.”

CHAPTER XIII

EXPLORING WITH DICK

THE children awoke the following morning to find Dick looking as well-groomed as though he had not spent the night in a car. He was gathering sticks and whistling softly to himself.

The children apologized for being so late.

"It was my fault for disturbing you last night," Dick protested. Then he went on to tell them that the woman at the cottage up the road would allow them to wash there and that she was going to supply them with breakfast.

"But we'll cook it ourselves," he added. "It'll be more fun; she's going to lend us a kettle and a frying-pan. So hurry up, please, I'm simply ravenous! Sleeping out of doors gives you an appetite, I find."

It certainly did, the children agreed. They ran off to the cottage, taking their brush and comb with them—four dishevelled little people they were, too, but when a quarter of an hour later they returned to the wood, even Montague presented a fairly respectable appearance.

And then followed the preparing of breakfast. Dick already had the fire burning, a somewhat smoky

one—but what did that matter, wasn't it the inevitable, almost the correct thing at a picnic? They hung the kettle over it (the children had brought the breakfast things with them on their return from the cottage), and Dick made himself stoker-in-chief. Would the boys gather more sticks? he said, and would the girls spread the cloth, and after that, would Nancy fry the eggs and bacon? Would they not, indeed! How eagerly those four little people threw themselves into their allotted tasks! Mavis arranged the tea-cups and plates and gathered some scabious flowers for the cloth while Nancy cut stacks of bread and butter. Then came the frying of the bacon—and here Nancy began to feel her responsibilities. To fry eggs and bacon for a grown-up person made you feel as important as when you poured out coffee for a prior.

“Could you rake the wood away for me?” she enquired, looking gravely at the uneven heap of burning sticks. “I could fry better on the ashes I think.”

“That's a good idea,” Dick said, as he hastened to do her bidding.

How good the bacon smelt as it sizzled in the pan. Nancy felt a little nervous as to the eggs—would she make a horrid mess of them? Fortunately, however, they were so new-laid that the yolks simply had to remain whole, and it was a flushed and excited little girl who in a few minutes announced that breakfast was ready and would everybody please gather round at once and eat it while it was hot?

Nobody needed a second bidding, and very soon the whole party was deep in eggs and bacon, and rather smoky-tasting tea. There was no salt, for they had finished their own and had forgotten to bring any from the cottage, but who cared ?

“ ’Tisn’t a libation feast, so it doesn’t matter, does it ? ” Billy said.

Everybody was out to make light of any difficulty that should present itself that morning. They chipped each other in a friendly spirit that hitherto had been unknown to Montague ; at first he was scarcely sure whether they were joking or serious, but so infectious was the good-natured banter that, presently, he found himself being drawn into it and taking laughingly from Billy what he had taken from no other boy before. And Dick, glancing at his happy face and remembering the Montague of Riversham, marvelled that so short a time should so have transformed the boy. Certainly, as regarded him, the Prior was right to have suggested allowing them to continue their adventuring.

Billy, teasing, cheeky Billy, was the leader of the fun. Impossible this morning, he found, to be serious and worry yourself about ways and means and whether you ought to do this or that. Yesterday it had rankled with him that there should be real necessity for Dick’s return of their own hospitality, but to-day, in the jolly sunlight, it seemed a small thing to worry about. Besides, was not a person who had offered up a libation with you a comrade, and between comrades was there

not always give and take ? When *your* luck happened to be in, it was your turn to give freely; why grudge the other fellow the pleasure of doing the honours ?

So Billy was just his happy irresponsible self, and it must be confessed he ate his full share of the fast-diminishing stack of food.

While they were gathering up the breakfast things after the meal was finished, Dick made a casual reference to the condition of the boys' faces.

"It was 'cos of me they got smashed about," Mavis explained. "Some big horrid boys tripped me up, and Billy and Monty settled them !"

"Oh !" Dick could see that the "settling" had been no easy matter, but he hesitated to question them further, for something in Billy's attitude suggested that the subject was one he did not wish to discuss. Curious they should be so reticent about the affair, he thought. However, no bones were broken, and they were in his care again now, so there was nothing to worry about.

"And what are your plans for to-day ?" he enquired carelessly.

Nancy and Billy looked at each other.

"Why," said Nancy, "we haven't any for this morning. We—we thought we wouldn't travel to-day."

"Then why not come for a ride in the car ? I'm sure those people at the cottage would let Modestine graze in the paddock for an hour or so. I wish you'd come—one gets tired of one's own company, you know."

The children looked at each other again. Why not go? Adventuring was out of the question until after Mavis had won the prize; besides, if you were flying along in a car there would not be the long, slow hours of waiting for the race. With their eyes they signalled "yes" to each other.

"Thank you ever so much," Nancy replied, "we should like it awfully. Only, please, could we be quite sure to be back here by two o'clock?"

Dick assented readily, again asking no questions. He could not fail to notice, however, that there was something behind this desire to return by two o'clock. There was something, too, behind this hanging about in one place when yesterday they were all for penetrating further into the hills. What could be the reason, and why were they so reticent about it? Dick was finding them a little difficult to understand. Their characters seemed so frank and open; their manner to him was so full of comradeship and yet every now and then a wall of reserve would seem to be between them. As to their engagement for the afternoon, was it, he wondered, connected with the fight? Ah, that must be it; hostilities very likely were to be renewed. Well, he would know this afternoon for he was fully determined not to let them out of his sight.

However, it was about time to be starting, and everybody bustled about. There were all the things to be returned to the cottage, their own blankets to be left there, and Modestine to be taken to her fresh

quarters—a willing Modestine for the grass along the edge of the wood had been scanty.

And now that their own adventure was at a standstill everybody began to take an eager interest in the ride. The hills towards Gleambridge they wanted to keep for their travels, but would it be possible, Nancy enquired, to go to that highest hill across the valley, the one in the far distance?

“Quite possible,” was Dick’s reply.

“And be back by two o’clock?”

“Yes, and be back by two o’clock.”

And with this assurance everybody scrambled into the car and Dick set out for Birdstone, the highest point in the hills.

Nancy and Mavis sat with him in the front seat, and during that ride he learned a great deal about the family, about their home, about Nestcombe and the river and forest. Here, at least, they showed no reticence. That they worshipped every inch of those home-places was evident. Their father and mother, Aunt Letty and Uncle Val, how proud they were of them all, how they adored them, how endless was their chatter about them. Dick, as he listened, marvelled how they had ever come to leave such a home.

“The spirit of adventure and the blindness of childhood, I suppose,” he thought. “By Jove! when they realize what they have done how miserable they will be, poor kiddies.”

Presently they came to a small town that seemed to

scramble down the hill towards the valley ; a town of quaint old nooks and corners, while on the opposite side of the valley, the Gleambridge side, the loveliest little village they had ever seen, except, of course, Nestley, played "bo-peep" amongst some pines on the side of the hill. Nancy indulged in a "spasm" on Mavis when she remembered that to-morrow, perhaps, they might explore it.

Then on and on again, gradually getting away from the Gleambridge country. The miles flew past with hills piled up about them. Such tonic, too, in the air ! The children responded to the exhilaration of it and forgot their troubles, forgot, almost, that Mavis was to run in the race, for both troubles and race seemed to belong to some far-off, unreal world.

They were on the main road now and the running was splendid. Yet, though they were so thoroughly enjoying the ride, in their secret hearts they were glad that their own private travels did not lie in this direction. Motoring along good, well-kept roads was one thing, but to seek adventure or romance here with civilization shouting at you—no, that would have been impossible.

Presently, they began to climb. Up and up, with deep wooded valleys dropping away to the right, and yet other hills stretching leftward. A lonely farm, a cottage here and there, a house ; that was all apparently between them and the very heart of nature. All except that well-kept road that wound right up here

into the loneliness of the hills, robbing them, for Nancy at least, of the charm she had found when trudging along the dusty roads across the valley.

Yet, though part of Nancy's mixed little mind disapproved of civilized hill-roads, another part of her was thoroughly enjoying itself. Mr. Frampton was so easy to talk to and seemed so interested in all they told him about themselves. And then again, flying through the air in a car always intoxicated Nancy. Had Dick been guided entirely by her wishes he would have exceeded the speed limit on the lower roads; up here in the hills the going, of course, was slower.

Quite suddenly, as it seemed to the children, the road opened out on to a wide plain. A neat, civilized-looking village was spread over it in orderly fashion, and when they arrived at a somewhat imposing-looking hotel Dick stopped the car.

"We've reached the top of the hill," he explained. "I'll go in and make arrangements for lunch, and then we'll explore a bit—there's plenty of time," he added, noticing anxious puckers in the children's faces. He knew, of course, that they were thinking about that mysterious engagement for the afternoon. He began to wonder as he entered the hotel whether he was right in imagining it to be a fight. Surely there was something more important to account for what he had seen in their faces at that moment. Besides (how stupid of him not to think of this before), Nancy and

Mavis would not wish for the renewal of hostilities. Well, this afternoon he would know.

He rejoined the children after he had made arrangements for an early lunch, and then they began to explore. The village itself was too prim to interest them, but what amazed Montague was that there should be one at all up here. Being used only to the gently undulating hills of East Anglia, this hill was a mountain to him. How could they possibly get food for a whole village to such a height, he wondered? Even the other children, used as they were to finding houses tucked away in the heights of the forest, even they owned to a little astonishment at finding so large a village so far away from the world. They certainly must be glad of the good road that brought civilization nearer to them. Well-kept roads, even Nancy admitted, had their uses after all.

However, though the village was not interesting, Dick had something to show them, he said, that would delight Nancy. He led them off the main road down a lane where hill-flowers unknown even to the forest children were rioting along the steep banks. The girls were enchanted with them, but Dick assured them with a laugh that it was not flowers he had to show them. He scanned the landscape anxiously.

"Come here, Nancy," he said (Mavis was still picking flowers, and the boys were scrambling about on the banks), "you can just see them, but you'll have to look hard—they're barely visible."

Nancy knew by the way Dick spoke that it was something she would like very much.

“ Oh, what is it ? ” she cried.

Her gaze followed Dick's pointing finger, and there, down in the valley to the left she saw, very faintly, the fair laced tower of Gleambridge Cathedral. But that was not all. For, following the pointing finger, she made out with a great deal of eye-straining and perhaps a little imagination, the towers of *two* other cathedrals, one to the north, and the other to the north-east.

Three cathedrals ! Three fair towers ! Why, one alone sent poetry dancing through you. Three cathedrals rising out of the mist—a beautiful valley held in the keeping of three white towers ! Nancy's imagination wanted to get to work at once on a poem. Oh, indeed, civilized roads were not to be despised if they brought you to this. And nothing romantic could happen, she had thought, on a motor ride. Why, that valley was alive with romance for those who had “ imagination eyes ” !

Dick watched the animated little face with pleasure. How “ alive ” the child was ; what an interest she took in everything and everybody. She dreamed her dreams, but because of this intense “ aliveness ” she would never, he knew, develop into a mere dreamer—never could the word “ mooney ” be applied to her—except perhaps by a teasing brother—and, indeed, the quaint mixture that made up her character, the

Aprilness of it was what interested Dick in her. Having no little sisters of his own, he hoped the future was going to give him a good deal of Nancy's company.

However, it was time now to be returning to the hotel, and everybody confessed that they were quite ready for luncheon. This out-of-doors life made one ravenously hungry, they found.

Fortunately, a generous meal awaited them. Dick led them to a table laid for five that had been reserved for them. Very grown-up and important these little people felt as they seated themselves, for it was the first time any of them had lunched at an hotel. And a waiter to attend to your wants, too; instinctively they straightened themselves and tried to live up to the occasion. Oh, indeed, there was a certain glamour about this civilization, especially the bits that belonged to the never-before-experienced world.

Immediately after lunch they started on the return journey. Dick took them another, and shorter, way, yet though the scenery was if anything more beautiful than that on the morning ride, the children could take no real delight in it, for the thought of the coming race crowded out all else. And supposing they should have a puncture, and not be there in time—the very thought of it made them sick with apprehension. To be sure they had allowed a good margin, for the races did not begin until three o'clock, nevertheless they began to wish that they had not asked Dick to bring them so far.

However, all their fears proved to be groundless, for the clock on Barsdon church struck two as they climbed the lane that led to their wood.

What a glorious ride it had been. A shame that part of it had been spoiled by the thought of the race. Oh, if their misfortune were only as unreal as it had seemed on their way to Birdstone ; if they could just have spent the afternoon in the wood with kind Mr. Frampton. They heaped their thanks upon him, but he waived them aside. The pleasure had been his, he said, and, indeed, secretly he had rejoiced to have them safely under his eye for so long.

Nancy and Mavis, directly they jumped out of the car, turned to go to the cottage to wash and do their hair before going down to Barsdon.

“ Are you going to Mrs. Hale’s ? ” Dick enquired. “ You might tell her we should like tea at five o’clock, unless,” he added, “ you would like to have it at the inn down in Barsdon ? ”

The wood, they all agreed, would be nicest, and Nancy promised to deliver Dick’s message.

Their preparations were simple, and soon two somewhat nervous-looking little girls might have been seen hurrying down a field path at the back of the wood—a short cut to Barsdon of which Mrs. Hale had told them.

“ Do you really think I’ll win ? ” Mavis enquired anxiously.

“ Why, yes, of course. You always do, so don’t worry, Babs ! ”

“ I wish I’d got a better frock on,” Mavis continued. “ Everybody else will be dressed up. ’Sides, the mud did stain this one.”

Again Nancy consoled her. Nobody would know her and people would be thinking too much about her pretty way of running to notice her dress.

Mavis was somewhat comforted. Nothing would have induced her to have appeared in a public place at home in a stained frock, but because they needed the money so badly she would try not to mind strangers seeing her in so sorry a garb.

“ I’m glad we’re miles and miles from home, though,” she said, as they turned into the village. “ I’m glad forest people don’t come to hill Flower Shows.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE RACE

THE Flower Show, they found, was being held in the Rectory meadow, and thither, after someone had shown them the direction, they bent their steps.

"I wish you could have come in with me," Mavis said wistfully, when they reached the gate.

"So do I," Nancy replied, "but I can't as we've only one sixpence, but I'll stay quite near."

She turned to the man at the entrance and asked whether he could tell her about what time the race for little girl visitors would take place. The man looked at his watch.

"In about half an hour," he replied.

Nancy thanked him and drew Mavis away from the fast-gathering crowd at the gate.

"Let's walk round the outside of the meadow," she whispered, "and see if there's a hole in the hedge that I can watch through. Then you'll know just where I am, and it will be nicer for you."

The meadow was a large one. Presently, along the further side of it they found a small opening where it was possible to see all that was happening. Here

they stayed till the half-hour was nearly up, watching the crowds round the swings and roundabouts, and thinking how, at any other time, they would have loved to be in the thick of all the fun.

When it was time for Mavis to go, Nancy took her as far as the gate. She watched the lonely little figure—with the sixpence clasped tight in her hand—advance timidly towards the race-course and then ran back to her opening on the other side of the meadow.

The next five minutes were five of the longest Nancy had ever known. Far across the race-course she could just see her little sister waiting with a group of other girls. Mavis would be wearing that dear little smile that made everybody love her and nobody would know how bad she was feeling inside. But Nancy knew. And as she waited her conscience began to trouble her. *Ought* she to have let a little girl of seven, the pet of the family, do this thing? To let her be there alone in that crowd of strangers—what would Mother say? Nancy pressed her hands tight together, and if it had been possible would have called the child back.

“Oh, I didn’t think! I didn’t think!” she cried with passionate regret. “Oh, *why* didn’t Billy and I think?”

Suddenly, the whistle sounded, and the race started. Nancy scrambled further up the bank, and almost pushed herself through the hedge in her anxiety to see. About a dozen girls were running, all of them but Mavis wearing garden-party frocks. Most of them



*She watched the lonely little figure, with the sixpence clasped
tight in her hand.*

seemed to be about Mavis' own age, but three of them were almost as tall as Nancy herself. *Could* Mavis possibly beat them? After the first breathless second or so Nancy knew there was no need to fear, for Mavis was skimming over the ground so swiftly that the other girls, though some of them, apparently, were using far more energy, were left far behind. Nancy saw people craning forward to watch her little sister ; she almost *felt* their admiration as the small figure skimmed bird-like over the ground. The applause when Mavis reached the rope was deafening. Nancy's heart swelled with pride as she listened to it and for the moment self-reproach slipped into the background.

She scrambled down into the road again and waited eagerly for Mavis to come to her. A few minutes later she saw her coming round the bend in the road and ran forward to meet her. Then she paused in consternation, for in that little figure coming slowly towards her, in the drooping head there was nothing of the conqueror. What could possibly have happened ? With outstretched arms she flew towards the sad little figure that advanced so reluctantly.

" Mavis dear, what is the matter ? Tell me," she cried, as she held her close. " You won the race—I saw you. Are you hurt ? Do tell me, dear ! "

Mavis clung passionately to her.

" Oh," she sobbed, " that horrid Margaret Seaton was there—I saw her just as I was coming away. And she saw me and she looked at my dirty frock and

she'd got on her best knitted mauve silk. An' she'll tell everybody I ran for seven-and-sixpence! Oh, Nancy, let's go away—let's go home! I *can't* wait and take the prize in front of everybody looking like a tramp!"

Margaret Seaton, the most snobbish girl in Nestley, here in the hills! And only just before the race they had been comforted by the thought that forest people did not go to the hill Flower Shows. What could possibly have brought her here? Oh, of course! It was the holidays, and she was probably visiting friends in the neighbourhood. But that of all people it should have been Margaret Seaton! Nancy, knowing the girl, and knowing Mavis, was overwhelmed now with the remorse that had been tugging at her conscience while she waited for the race to begin. She hugged Mavis close and stroked her hair.

"No, dear, you shan't wait to take the prize. We ought never to have let you go in for the race. Mummy would say it was a dreadful thing for us to let our baby earn the money. Billy and I ought to have thought. If we can't earn it some other way we must go home."

"Oh, but are you sure you and Billy won't hate me? Billy will be so disappointed."

"Yes, but he'll understand—you know he will. I'll explain to him. Don't worry any more, dear. See, we'll sit down here together till your eyes are dry, 'cos you won't want people to see you've been crying; then we'll go."

And so together they sat down on the bank till the storm of tears should have subsided.

What was to happen now, Nancy wondered? The seven-and-sixpence belonged to Mavis, but even if the child should presently change her mind and be willing to go up to receive it, she was determined not to allow her to make the sacrifice. Poor old Billy, how disappointed he would be! She must call him aside and talk things over with him before anything could be decided.

"Look!" whispered Mavis, her voice trembling with agitation, "there's Billy coming along the road! Oh, Nancy, you *will* explain, won't you?"

Nancy re-assured her and stood up to wave to Billy, who had not yet seen them. He ran forward eagerly, and then he, too, paused as Nancy had done. No need to ask questions; he knew at once that they were still penniless. Poor little Mavis, how sorry she seemed. Ah, but she mustn't be—he must pretend that he, at least, did not care!

"Hullo!" he said. "No go, eh, old girl? Well, never mind—you were a little brick to try; you've been jolly sporty!"

"Oh, but I haven't!" Mavis wailed, her tears starting afresh. "I'm not a tiny bit sporty! I won the prize an'——"

"I'll tell him," Nancy interrupted.

And then she explained everything to Billy, telling also of her own remorse.

"Say something to cheer her up," she whispered. "She's feeling so bad about it."

For answer Billy slipped down on to the bank by Mavis and put his arms round her.

"It's all my fault," he said contritely. "I—I never thought till a little while ago up in the wood, at least, not properly. That's why I came to find you."

"Are Mr. Frampton and Monty still there?" Nancy asked, seating herself on the other side of Mavis.

"Yes. I said we'd be back to tea, but—but don't let's hurry. Let's sit here together a bit, just the three of us, shall we?"

Just the three of them in a fellowship that even Dick or Monty could not quite enter into yet because it required more even than the intimacy of the last few days to belong fully to the comradeship that existed between these three.

For a long while they sat there, saying nothing, but with understanding between them. Nobody passed them. Once a lady and a little girl came towards a house on the other side of the road. They watched them idly, noticing the daintiness of the child and the youngness of her mother, yet none of them was really interested, though at any other time they would have been struck by the music in the child's laugh.

"Billy," Mavis whispered presently, "p'raps I *will* go and take the prize. I—I could shut my eyes tight and not see anybody. P'raps Margaret Seaton will have gone."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Billy replied emphatically. "I'd rather starve than let you do it. No! I've been thinking, and I can't see any way out but to go home. I left Mont cutting down wood for his frames, but he'd never sell enough to keep us all. 'Sides——" He broke off abruptly, not liking to remind Mavis that the sixpence for her entrance fee had left them with only a halfpenny. "So shall I ask Mr. Frampton to take us home or send the telegram to the Prior?"

They couldn't send the wire, Nancy said, for she had noticed that it was early closing day when they passed through the village.

"Then we must ask Mr. Frampton to take us home, and we'll have to have poor old Ladybird sent on somehow. We shall have to tell everything to Mr. Frampton 'cos we can't borrow money from him without letting him know that we can pay him back. We shall have to take it out of the Savings Bank."

"Yes," Nancy replied thoughtfully. "But need we go to-night, Billy?" For herself the glamour had gone out of the hills, for the time being, at least, but she knew what giving in would mean to Billy. "Couldn't we wait till to-morrow and just *see* if we can think of some plan?"

Billy shook his head.

"No, we can't. We can't sponge on Mr. Frampton. To-day was different, 'cos we thought—I mean—oh, it's difficult to explain."

Though he found it difficult to express his idea he knew quite well where the difference lay. To-day was not sponging, but to-morrow, if they stayed, would be. No, it would not be "cricket" to keep their penniless condition hidden any longer from Mr. Frampton. He must know everything.

"Shall we go and tell him now?" he asked. The explanation was not going to be easy, and the sooner it was over the better.

Three sad and forlorn little people set off dejectedly down the road. Sounds of merriment came from the meadow. The children heard them, but they would not turn their heads in the direction of a place that was now so hateful to them; as long as they lived, Flower Shows and all the jolly things attached to them that they had used to love would recall the bitterness of this day.

And so they walked along with their eyes fixed on the dusty road until a gurgle of laughter caused them to look up. Instinctively they paused, arrested by what they saw. Instinctively, too, they crept towards the fence that stood between them and that which had attracted them and stood with their noses pressed to it, their troubles for the moment forgotten, their interest thoroughly aroused.

"Oh, the darling!" Nancy whispered. "See! It's the little girl we saw go into this house this afternoon. Isn't she sweet?"

In a paddock at the side of the house was a pond with

a willow tree drooping over it, and near the pond, with her back to the road was the little girl they had seen earlier in the afternoon. She was dancing, and as she danced she crooned a little song. Indeed, it was the song that seemed to suggest the dance. She sang of the "p'itty ripple" in the water, and as she danced her arms rippled through the air. She sang of the slow fluttering of leaves from the willow into the pond—again her fingers moved lightly as though she were scattering leaves. She sang of the "p'itty, p'itty sunshine that makes 'ittle girls happy," and as she sang she became the very embodiment of joy—as joyous as the swallows that had splashed their happiness about the Prior's garden. And then she paused for a moment and seemed lost in thought. With a nod of satisfaction she again took up the song and dance. She was a little mother now singing her dolly to sleep—a troublesome dolly who needed much crooning to before she would sink to rest on the grass by the pond.

The children watched with breathless interest. They were spellbound, fascinated. Never before had they even imagined anything like the dancing of this fairy of five. A grown-up person would have said that the child was the embodiment of poetry, that she spilt it from her beautiful little fingers. They would have said, too, if they happened to be gifted with artistic perception, that rhythm was perfected in the movements and crooning of the tiny person. Something of the kind Nancy herself would have said had

she had the words at her command to express what she felt. As it was, she could only stand there with the other two children, each of them absorbed in the entrancing picture that certainly did not belong to the everyday world.

Time passed unheeded while they stood with their faces pressed to the fence and the child danced. Presently, however, she paused and seemed to be considering. Then a little gurgle of delight escaped her, and, clapping her hands, she ran swiftly towards the tree that hung over the pond. She stood by the edge of the water watching with delight something that evidently fascinated her.

"Is it a dragon-fly?" Mavis whispered.

Billy nodded.

"B'lieve there are lots of them, but I can't quite see. Wish she wouldn't get so near the water!"

The child talked and crooned to the dragon-flies. Stray words reached the children.

"P'itty sky things! Dear dancy things! Nonie loves 'oo—Nonie not hurt 'ittle sparkly things. Nonie dance like 'oo."

They saw her poise herself tiptoe with arms outspread, then, with a gurgle of laughter, skim with light flitting movements along the edge of the pond.

"Nonie sky thing, too, now," she gurgled. "But, oh, so sad, Nonie can't dance on water like 'oo."

Now, a root of the willow tree hung over the pond on a level with the bank like a great arm. The child

saw the root and, in her desire to get closer to the fascinating dragon-flies, she tip-toed along it and stood, with hands clasped together, on the very edge of the arm.

The children gazed in horror.

"She'll fall! Oh, she'll fall!" Mavis whispered.

"Hush! We mustn't frighten her," Nancy replied.

"But, oh, I wish she'd come off it! If we call her she'd fall in, I 'spect."

Billy said nothing, but his face went white with the tension of watching. He dared not move lest he should scare the child, but he was ready to vault the fence at the first hint of real danger.

For five long minutes they stood gripping the palings, while Nonie, regardless of her danger, crooned low and tenderly her delight in the flashes of blue life at her feet.

Suddenly, a dog entered the paddock from the garden and barking with joy rushed towards his little mistress. So absorbed was the child that she did not hear him until he reached the tree.

"Nikko!" she cried, "go back! Naughty—go back!"

The dog, however, was so delighted to see her that he ran along the root of the tree barking joyously, and then, reaching his beloved little mistress, jumped up to lick her face. Just a touch of his paw, just a touch of love, and with a frightened scream Nonie fell, her dress catching on the root of the tree and holding her just above the water.

Billy, however, had not waited to see the end. Before the dog had reached the tree he had vaulted the fence and was running towards the pond. He saw the child fall, he saw the little muslin garments catch on the jagged roots and hoped passionately that they would not give way before he could reach the suspended, frightened little girl.

"I'm coming!" he yelled. "Don't be frightened, Nonie!"

Pushing the excited dog out of the way he ran along the arm of the tree, and, kneeling down, reached for the screaming child. Then, regardless of the damage to her pretty clothes, he slipped his hands under her and dragged her away from the roots that had proved her salvation.

"Don't cry, dear," he panted. "You're safe now; wait just a minute and I'll crawl along to the bank with you. It's going to be jolly awkward, though!" he added to himself.

His arms ached from the strain of lifting the child, and his legs were cramped, for there was very little room for a big boy on the narrow ledge. Exactly how he should crawl back without dropping his precious burden he did not know, but Nancy solved the problem.

"Billy, wait a moment," she cried, as she and Mavis came running towards the tree. "I'll slither along sideways towards you, then I can take her from you and pass her on to Mavis. Now, are you ready?"



He slipped his hands under her and dragged her away from the roots.

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It was no easy matter for Billy to twist himself round and pass the frightened little girl to Nancy, but somehow or other he managed it. Nancy held the child tenderly a moment before passing her on to Mavis, and did her best to quieten her sobs.

"Oh, see!" Mavis cried, relief in her voice, "here's her mother running across the meadow. She'd better take her, hadn't she—she's stronger than me."

Nonie's mother reached the scene a moment later. Nancy smiled re-assuringly when she saw the alarm and agitation in her face.

"She's all right," she said. "But will you get where Mavis is, please, an' hold out your arms so I can pass her to you?"

Nonie's mother did not wait to be enlightened as to the cause of the tear-stained face and torn clothes, or the presence of the three little strangers, but simply held out her arms at Nancy's request, assured by her comforting smile that they, at least, were not responsible for the accident.

Nonie, when she saw that she was once more on firm ground, clasped her arms round her mother's neck.

"Nonie naughty 'ittle girl," she wailed repentantly.

"I rather think she is," her mother replied, holding her very, very close. "What is the naughty thing that my little girl has done this time?"

The children, who had scrambled to the bank, stood round watching the mother and child with undisguised interest. Nancy interrupted.

"It was really the dog," she explained. "He was so pleased to see Nonie an' he jumped up and pawed her and she fell, and, oh, wasn't it a good thing her dress got caught? Billy *might* not have got her out of the water in time if he'd had to jump in for her. He had to tear her clothes fearfully when he pulled her up, but he couldn't help it."

Couldn't help it? As though torn clothes mattered a scrap when Nonie was safe! Nonie's mother had listened gravely to Nancy's explanation, but now her hazel eyes lit up with a lovely smile as she looked at Billy over Nonie's head. Such a wonderful smile that Billy's young heart went out to her in worship. Again she turned to Nonie.

"I am still afraid that Nonie was right when she said she had been naughty. What, I wonder, was she doing on that narrow root? I seem to remember telling a little girl not to go near the water!"

Nonie looked up fearlessly into her mother's eyes and nodded.

"Yes, Nonie very naughty girl. It was the bits of sky things, they were *ever* pretty, an' I just wanted to know how to dance like them, an' so I forgotted, Mummy."

"I see. But now what is going to happen about it? How am I to punish you?"

"Oh!"

The cry broke involuntarily from the three children. *Must* this fairy-like little dancer who had held them so

enthralled suffer ordinary, everyday punishment? Must she perhaps be *smacked*? It was unthinkable.

Nonie's mother seemed to take them into her confidence as she looked up at them with a sorry smile.

"You see," she explained, "little girls of five are not too young to learn to obey. Nonie has been told not to go near the pond."

Nonie suddenly looked up hopefully.

"But 'oo never said 'pwomiss,' did 'oo? Could honour do 'stead of punis'ment?"

The children listened incredulously. What could this baby thing possibly know of honour?

Nonie's mother remained thoughtful for a moment. The children fancied they saw relief in her eyes.

"Very well," she replied. "We will try."

She put Nonie down on the ground and immediately the baby thing straightened herself like a soldier and stood with head erect gazing fearlessly at her mother, who looked down at her gravely and tenderly.

"Nonie Brimscombe," she said solemnly, "do you know what honour is?"

"Yes, Mummy."

"And truth?"

"Yes, Mummy."

"Can you promise on your word of honour never to go near the pond alone again—not even to see a dragon-fly?"

"Yes, Mummy."

"Can I rely on you to keep this promise?"

"Yes, Mummy, Nonie'll not bweak her word." Then she relaxed and held out her arms to her mother with a winning smile. "Are I forgiven, Mummy dear? I are ever, ever sorry."

Mrs. Brimscombe stooped and kissed the child.

"Yes, and now we must go and change that frock. But we haven't yet thanked these little people for rescuing you, have we?"

She turned towards the children, who, during the little scene between Nonie and her mother, had been listening and watching intently. Was it a kind of "make-believe"? Ah, yes, it was that surely, and yet behind the "make-believe" they felt something real and big, something that made them each instinctively straighten themselves just as Nonie had done. Whether it was the words or the way in which Mrs. Brimscombe spoke them they hardly knew, yet all that was best in them responded to the little scene. If Flower Shows were henceforth to have a sting behind them the word "honour" was always to awaken the memory of this poignant little scene in the paddock. Yet *why* had Mrs. Brimscombe played this "make-believe" with Nonie and *what* was behind it? And again, why did the name "Brimscombe" seem, well, not familiar perhaps, but to stir up some memory? Suddenly, Billy remembered. This was the Mrs. Brimscombe whose husband had been drowned in a boating accident at Gleambridge the previous

summer. He recollected it all; a friend of Aunt Letty's knew her and had told them all about it, how splendid she had been about it, how she had never forgotten the creed of the Guides to smile bravely through trouble. Ah, of course, she was the head of the Girl Guides in that district, Aunt Letty's friend had told them; and though Nonie was too young to belong to the Guides her mother evidently was training her to be one—that, of course, accounted for what they had just witnessed.

But Mrs. Brimscombe was speaking.

"I am wondering," she said, and her voice was tremulous with emotion, "how I am ever going to thank you. It is—difficult," she added, and her smile as she glanced from them to Nonie was so unspeakably tender, so alight with something that came from her very soul that not only Billy's, but the girls' hearts, too, went out to her. Then she pushed emotion from her and turned to Nonie. "I wonder, if we asked them very nicely, if our little friends would stay and have tea with us?" Now, so far Mavis had been somewhat in the background, and it was Billy, her Nonie's rescuer, of whom Mrs. Brimscombe had taken special notice. Suddenly, however, she looked at Mavis with eyes of recognition. "Why!" she exclaimed, "aren't you the little girl who won the Visitors' Race?"

Mavis, looking flushed and uncomfortable, hardly knew what to reply.

"Yes, I *did* win it," she began. "But—but——"

She paused and threw an appealing glance at Nancy and Billy.

“Ah, then you certainly *must* stay and have tea with Nonie. The prizes won't be distributed until about six o'clock. Stay and play with Nonie till then, will you, dears? That is, if you can,” she added.

“Thank you very much,” Billy began bravely, “but—but I don't think Mavis is going back to the Flower Show. We—we don't need the money very much.”

“And we promised Mr. Frampton and Montague we'd be back for tea,” Nancy added. “But we *would* like to have been able to play with Nonie,” she added regretfully.

Mrs. Brimscombe looked at the children thoughtfully. Now what, she wondered, lay behind their reluctance to take the prize? Mavis had won it fairly, she was entitled to it. Yet the child's instinctive glance at her soiled frock had not escaped her or the tear-stains round her eyes. Something clearly was wrong. What were they doing here alone and where were the Mr. Frampton and Montague they had mentioned? Not at the Flower Show apparently, else they themselves would have been returning there. No, evidently they were alone in Barsdon. Was it possible they had come specially for the race? For Billy's denial of their need of the money set her wondering. Could it be that they

needed it, and that some hurt to their young pride (for she knew from her wide experience the sensitiveness of a child's heart) prevented them from taking it? The children's growing embarrassment troubled her. In some way or other she must help them out of their difficulty.

"You know," she said, turning to Nancy confidentially, "I think your little sister ought to have that money. The Committee simply won't know what to do with it if it's left on their hands. They get rather fuddled, poor dears, if things don't go just by clockwork. You see, it's a great day with them, *lots* of preparation beforehand, and to-day hard work since before seven o'clock. I've got a prize for Table Decoration, and I simply daren't not take it. I wonder if you would let me take yours at the same time, as you have to rejoin your friends for tea? I'll give you the money now, and you can give me a receipt for it that I can show the Committee. Just in case," she added, with a laugh, "they think I'm trying to get it unlawfully. Come along into the house and I'll get it for you," and she moved across the paddock without waiting for a reply.

"Boy, give Nonie pick-a-back," demanded Nonie, who had been making overtures of friendship to the responsive children. "Nonie like 'oo!"

Billy stooped and picked up the child very readily, yet still his conscience troubled him as he galloped towards the house with her. It seemed so mean to

take the money when they hadn't the courage to go up and receive it themselves. When they reached the house he put Nonie down and stood in the porch, hesitating uncomfortably. *What* should he do? What ought he to do? The money would make such a difference—just exactly how hard it would be to give up the adventure he had not realized until Mrs. Brimscombe's suggestion had seemed to make it possible to go on. And yet that the money should come so easily——

“Won't it—won't it bother you?” he asked awkwardly, looking up at Mrs. Brimscombe, who, seeing his indecision, had waited behind while Nonie took the girls into the house. “If you'd rather, I'll go and get it if the Committee would give it to me. The others could go on and tell Mr. Frampton I'm coming later. You see, we *can't* let Mavis take it herself 'cos, well, 'cos it was mean of us to let her go in for the race—only, we didn't think. And—and it wasn't true that we don't want it, least not quite true. We needn't be poor, it's not anybody's fault but our own—only——”

Billy paused, hardly knowing how to proceed without telling the whole story, and this he could not do, not even to this lovely lady. And yet——

Mrs. Brimscombe had listened with interest and sympathy to Billy's half-confession, filling in with ready intuition the gaps in his story. *Why* they needed the money, she hardly felt it necessary to

enquire. Probably it was for some little private purpose, some secret between the three of them. From their conversation they were evidently in the care of some responsible person, and their appearance, except for the stain on Mavis's frock, gave no indication of poverty. Nevertheless, knowing so well the hearts of children, she was now more anxious than ever to help them in their difficulty.

She put both her hands on Billy's shoulders and looked down into his eyes. For a moment she did not speak, and in that silent communion each read the truth and honesty in the other, oh, and a whole world of other things besides.

"Won't you let me do this for you?" she pleaded. "You saved my Nonie and—she is all I have."

How could Billy resist such an appeal? That smile that could conquer tragedy, a smile that with most people would have been tears, was in her eyes, and, because of it and the restrained sadness in her voice, all that was chivalrous in Billy went out to her. And there was a good deal of chivalry in Billy. A boy who has grown to ten years of age with a Raleigh for his hero, who has walked with that noble gentleman in imagination not once but hundreds of times under stately trees that have probably swayed above the real Raleigh, who has felt his influence all around him, such a boy could not fail to have something chivalrous in his own composition. Raleigh had spread his cloak for a queen to tread on; Billy's whole soul was

at the service of *his* Queen. Nevertheless, being a normal, healthy-minded boy he found it difficult to express what was passing in his mind.

"Her dress is spoilt though, an' all her other clothes."

That was all he could find to say.

Mrs. Brimscombe laughed (she had read the surrender in his eyes, and that protective sympathy for her that he found it impossible to express did not escape her). "Yes, and I ought to go and put her into something respectable, oughtn't I? It's her *best* frock, too." Again a low rich gurgle that was so like Nonie's escaped her. What were a few torn clothes when your one earthly treasure was safe, her laughter seemed to say. "And so," she added, pressing Billy's shoulder affectionately, "it's a bargain, isn't it?"

Billy nodded.

"An'—an' thank you awfully." He hesitated, and she waited, knowing that he had more to say. "Could I some day write and tell you what we wanted it for?" he asked, looking up into her face. "I can't tell you now but—but I'd like you to know. It's awfully important and interesting, and it means not having to give in about something."

"Yes, write and tell me all you can, and be very sure I shall be interested in anything that concerns you—always. Tell me just one thing," she added, looking straight into his eyes, "are you more than seven-and-sixpence poor?"

Billy returned her look squarely. He could not possibly resent the implied suggestion behind her words, and he thought the matter out carefully before replying. Sleeping out of doors had become a fascination, therefore nothing would be required for lodgings. Surely seven-and-sixpence should feed them for three or four days longer?

"No," he replied, "I think we're not, but—thank you very much."

Mrs. Brimscombe was satisfied that he spoke the truth.

"Come in for a moment," she said; "I must have that receipt, you know!"

Nonie, regardless of her rags, was playing hostess to Nancy and Mavis in the drawing-room.

"Oh, she's sweet!" Nancy whispered to Mrs. Brimscombe, when she and Billy entered the room. "She's pretending to be you, talking 'grown-up afternoon-tea talk'—so funny and quaint! I *wish* we could see her again some day."

"You are going to," Mrs. Brimscombe replied simply. "Nonie and I are not going to lose sight of you, are we, Nonie? Shall we ask them if they will come and stay with us some day?"

To come and stay here with Nonie's mother? Billy, as he watched Mavis sign the receipt and drink the milk Mrs. Brimscombe insisted on them having before leaving, thrilled with pride at the thought of it. Aunt Letty's friend had said that it was a privilege

to serve under her (she herself was a captain in the Guides). Well, what of the privilege of staying in her house and perhaps being allowed to be her protector, since she had no one now to look after her? Oh, this hill country, what endless wonders it held? Who could possibly prefer an everyday garden to adventuring here?

CHAPTER XV

HALF-CONFESSIONS

AND while life was pressing adventure towards the three children down in Barsdon, Dick and Montague were having a dull and miserable time up in the wood.

Dick was not greatly troubled at first at the absence of the two girls; they were probably lingering in the paddock petting Modestine. He lay on the ground smoking, waiting for some move on the part of the boys, for that they should have no share in the mysterious engagement had never occurred to him. To his surprise, however, neither of them for quite a long time showed the slightest inclination to leave the wood. But, presently, through half-closed eyes, he noticed a growing restlessness in Billy. There was an anxious, troubled look on the usually sunny face, and, presently, apparently unable to keep his anxiety to himself, he drew Montague to the edge of the wood and a whispered consultation took place between them. Dick sat up and watched them. Was it the girls Billy was concerned about? Surely in that case he would have consulted with him rather than Montague. Yet they certainly had been gone a long time. He was about to join the two and make casual enquiries

regarding the girls' absence when Billy disappeared and Montague, looking depressed and unhappy, re-entered the wood. Now what was to be done? Should he question Montague or wait for further developments? And why should Montague wear that air of depression? And then again, what was he doing with that neat little bundle of wood; why was he cutting it into such short lengths? Apparently the boy had forgotten that he was not alone for, as he worked, he began to talk to himself.

"Hope Billy remembers the tacks if he finds the girls. Wish I'd got 'em now, so I could go down to the Flower Show and sell to the people as they came out. Oh dear, I'm feeling rather lonely; wish *I* could have gone to find Mavis, but Billy said stay here. Wonder if they'll meet those ruffians who stole the money? P'raps Billy'll take it from them again—then we *shall* be rich!"

Dick was not near enough to catch all the rumblings, but he had heard enough to arouse his curiosity and some anxiety. He thought it high time to recall himself to Montague's memory.

"Hullo, old chap, what are you doing?" he enquired, rising and sauntering towards him.

"Just making picture frames," Montague replied.

"Picture frames?" Dick repeated. "Won't they be rather in the way on your travels?"

"They're not going on our travels." Then an idea came to Montague. Why not ask Mr. Frampton to



*I've not yet heard the full story of yours and Billy's
battered faces.*

buy some? Billy wouldn't let them borrow money from him, but to sell something to him was surely different. "Do you want to buy some?" he asked. "When they're finished, I mean. I can't tack them together till Mavis——"

"Yes?" said Dick. "'Till Mavis——'?"

"Oh, nothing!" Montague replied uncomfortably.

"Look here, old chap," Dick said, seating himself on a log near the boy, "I've not yet heard the full story of yours and Billy's battered faces. I wish you'd tell me all about it. Did anything happen to—well, to make it necessary for you to sell picture-frames?"

Montague, wishing fervently that the others were there to support him, eyed Dick dubiously, but made no reply.

"Don't you trust me?" asked Dick.

Montague nodded.

"Yes, but Billy said——"

"Yes—what did Billy say?"

"Oh, nothing, 'cept that you'd p'raps make us go back if you knew, an' if you didn't do that we'd be sponging on you. But it's all right now—least, it will be when Mavis comes back. I—I wish she'd come—I *wish* we hadn't let her!"

Montague paused. He was wishing with all his heart that he had not promised Billy to stay in the wood. They ought to have gone together; the anxiety of waiting was becoming almost unendurable,

and he would have given much to have been able to share his fears with Dick. Supposing something had happened to little Mavis? Oh, it was terrible to be left behind!

Dick slowly filled his pipe, thinking hard while he pressed the tobacco into the bowl, and glancing from time to time at Montague's troubled face.

"Look here, old chap," Dick began, "you're worried about them, I know. Now, suppose we give them another quarter-of-an-hour, and then if they haven't returned I think you had better tell me where they have gone and we will talk the matter over together and see what can be done. I'm worried, too, you know," he added.

"Are you fond of them?" Montague asked. "Would you mind if anything happened to them?"

"I should mind very much indeed," Dick replied, "if anything happened to any of you four youngsters—but it isn't going to! Now, is it a bargain?" He pulled out his watch and looked at Montague questioningly.

"Yes, if I needn't tell you what Billy wouldn't like me to tell you."

Montague himself would have been quite ready to confess the whole adventure from the very beginning to Dick, feeling sure that the friend who had stood by him so often in the dreadful aunt-days that were already beginning to fade into the remote past, would understand. And, after all, if he insisted on a return,

as far as he, Montague, was concerned, it would not greatly matter. Nothing would induce him to return to Riversham, but the children had offered to share their home with him, and he was secretly awaiting with eager interest the day when he should be initiated into the delights of their beloved Nestcombe. The grown-ups? Well, he would tolerate them for the children's sake; yes, even the aunt, since Mavis loved her. Nevertheless, though practically any place would be home for him if the children were there, for Billy's sake he hoped he would not be led to tell Mr. Frampton too much. Billy cared so tremendously about this adventure (that he was the leader Montague had recognized from the beginning), and because Billy had been such a good chum to him, because, moreover, he was beginning to care for him as he had never yet cared for another boy he wanted to stand loyally by his friend and not let him down.

He spent the next fifteen minutes wondering just how little he could tell Dick and hoping against hope that the children would turn up and relieve him of the necessity of saying anything at all. But the fifteen minutes dragged slowly by and they did not come.

"Now," said Dick, glancing at his watch, "the time is up, so let's see what can be done. Tell me—are they in Barsdon?"

"Yes."

"That's all right—then we haven't far to go. Why didn't you go with them?"

" I dunno. I *wanted* to. It was just Mavis and Nancy really who were to go, and Billy and me were to wait here, only Billy got worried and wished he'd not let Mavis—not let them go and I wished it too, and I wanted to go and fetch them back, and just do the picture-frames, but Billy said no, she was *his* sister, and he would go and find her and would I wait here 'case they came back another way."

" Yes—but what *is* it that Mavis went to do ? "

" Well, to run in a race at the Flower Show ! "

Dick showed his astonishment.

" Run in a race at the Flower Show ? " he repeated.

" Yes, for seven-and-sixpence," Montague growled, " 'cos nearly all our money was stolen."

Dick began to see daylight, but he looked down at Montague gravely.

" And you boys allowed little Mavis to do that rather than treat me as a comrade ? "

Montague said nothing, but he felt horribly ashamed, and very, very unhappy. He began to realize that as he knew Mr. Frampton so much better than the others he ought to have persuaded them to trust him. Very miserably he looked up at Dick.

" It's—it's not exactly *you*—it's your grown-upness, I b'lieve."

Ah, yes, that indeed was it. Dick knew it, and, for the first time in his twenty-one years, hated this barrier he had regarded hitherto as something very wonderful and very desirable. Yet—twenty-one—was it so far

from the world of childhood ? And what exactly *was* the barrier ; how could it be defined ? He had roughed it with them, had shared their picnics, had, he thought, dropped his "grown-upness" entirely. They were fond of him, there was no doubt of that, just as they were of Montague, yet, because of a nameless barrier, they had left him out in the cold, while the penniless boy (for Dick was sure Montague was not worth more than a few pence when he joined the adventurers) they had taken into their entire comradeship. It was impossible, of course, to be either hurt or angry, nevertheless, Dick regretted deeply that these care-free irresponsible little adventurers should think it necessary to shut him out.

"That's it!" he thought. "Irresponsible! The irresponsibility of childhood—these little people knew instinctively that one loses it when manhood comes." Dick suddenly felt very lonely and sighed for that lost boyhood that he had cast off so willingly.

Well, no use wasting time over vain regrets, something must be done immediately. He must run down to Barsdon in the car ; probably, after all, the children were merely waiting for Mavis to receive the prize.

"Wait here for me, Mont, in case I should miss them. And if I find them we'll all go to the Show together this evening."

Montague looked round at the silent wood and the loneliness smote him to the heart.

"You won't be *very* long, will you ?"

"No. If I don't see them soon I'll come back for you and we'll search together. Make a fire and get the kettle boiling," he added, thinking the time would drag less if the boy were occupied, "and don't worry, old chap. I'll find them, or we'll find them together."

For a moment their eyes met, and through the chilling loneliness in the boy's heart there swept a sudden surge of affection and gratitude and trust.

"You an' the Prior," he muttered, "an' my guardian aren't like ordinary grown-ups. I s'pose men are better'n women. I'm *glad* you're my friend."

Dick, as he drove rapidly down the lane to Barsdon felt absurdly happy at the boy's confidence. *Need* there be an insurmountable barrier, he wondered?

"Well, at least we're necessary to them sometimes," he thought, "and that is something."

He was just about to make enquiries as to where the Flower Show was being held when, hurrying along the village street towards him he caught sight of three well-known little figures.

"Mr. Frampton!"

Again Dick forgave these troublesome little people the anxiety they had caused him because of that unmistakable ring of gladness in their voices. Again he felt an absurd happiness when they scrambled into the car as though it were their right.

"Where's Monty?" Mavis asked, as Dick turned the car in the direction of the wood.

"Keeping his promise to Billy." Dick spoke some-

what shortly, for he wanted them to realize something of Montague's loneliness without them. "We began to think, you know, that our comrades had deserted us."

"Oh, but we couldn't do that!" Nancy exclaimed impulsively. "We *couldn't* come sooner—Monty will understand when we explain. And you——" She paused and looked questioningly at Billy. If only she might tell Mr. Frampton *some* part of the doings of the afternoon—it was hateful to be so secretive. To her delight and surprise Billy nodded consent, and turning again to Dick she began to tell him of Billy's rescue of Nonie.

"I didn't mean that part," Billy broke in. "I meant about us having the money stolen. We *couldn't* tell you yesterday, Mr. Frampton, and a little while ago we thought we'd *have* to tell you, 'cos it seemed to be the end of our travels. But it isn't the end after all and yet—oh, well, we just hate not telling you, 'cos we're all kind of chums together, aren't we?"

Very, very slowly Dick drove up the stoney lane, his heart thrilling with happiness as between them (Billy and Mavis who were in the back hanging over the seat) they told the full story of the fight and the lost purse, their shame at having only dry bread to offer him, Mavis's suggestion that she should enter for the race and even (with Mavis's consent) her encounter with the girl from Nestcombe.

Not quite all the story was told in the car. It was a shout of joy from Montague that interrupted the narrative. Poor, poor Monty, how sorry they were to have left him so long; how glad they were to see him again. Oh, it was good to be with these two dear comrades again. And tea was waiting for them? How nice of Mr. Frampton and Monty to have waited for them; they didn't deserve it and yet—and yet, oh, it was not at all easy, they were beginning to find, to know what was the right thing to do. Mr. Frampton and Montague had been worried about them, yes, and lonely, too—this they found out from Monty when, after tea, they were all sitting together quietly near the bower. And they were their comrades, both of them and—and should one hurt one's comrades? But then, it was unthinkingly. Yet again, *why* not have trusted Mr. Frampton? Wasn't it somehow different between a little band of friends, between out-of-doors.comrades? How sorry he seemed that they had not trusted him—yes, there was *his* point of view.

"I'm sorry," Billy said, "I—I wish we'd told you."

"And, oh, we were so unhappy about Mavis," Nancy added. "That was why Billy left you and Monty alone. But we ought to have told you." She was silent for a moment, then suddenly she asked Dick a question. "What is 'obligations'?" she demanded. "Do you have them towards people—people you like?"

“ Yes,” Dick replied, wondering what was coming, “ sometimes.”

Nancy’s eyes glowed.

“ Oh, do you know,” she continued, “ I’m just beginning to *feel* that word—it’s getting inside me, and I can hear a song in it. *Some* words, you know, dance inside me like music—pretty words, I mean, but I never thought ‘ obligations ’ would ! I thought it was a cold, ugly grown-up word, but it isn’t. It’s thrilly and—and chummy ! I—I can’t explain it better than that. *Do* you understand ? ”

Yes, Dick understood well enough. How dear these children were, how grateful he was to them for this comradeship they were extending to him. The invisible barrier still was there, they still had not made full confession, nevertheless Dick was convinced that as far as it was possible for them to take a “ grown-up ” into their childhood’s world, they had taken him and he was satisfied.

“ And yet,” he thought, as he sat watching them, “ though ‘ obligations ’ has become a living word for Nancy, none of them has even yet realized their obligations to their own people. I wonder when they will ? ”

CHAPTER XVI

THE DERELICT CAR

AFTER breakfast the following morning they gathered at the edge of the wood and scanned a grey, unpromising sky anxiously. What did Mr. Frampton think of the weather? Did he think it would be possible for them to sleep out-of-doors to-night?

Dick shook his head.

"It will rain before the day is out," he replied. "The wind will keep it off for a time, I think, but you'll certainly have to find a cottage this evening."

Billy and Nancy exchanged troubled glances. Seven-and-sixpence would not go very far, they knew, if some of it had to be used for sleeping accommodation, for they could not hope to find another Priory.

Dick, of course, knew that they were worried, and just before they were about to set out on their travels he made a proposal to them.

"I wonder," he began, as he lifted Mavis into the saddle, "if you would strike a bargain with me to-day? You invite me to lunch, and let me invite you to tea at a cottage I know at a gem of a village

called Omberley. Probably we could stay there for the night, if need be, and that," he added with a smile, " I should like to be *my* part of the programme. Will you let your big chum do this ? "

How could they refuse when he seemed to wish it so much ? Was he not now one of themselves—almost ? For the quiet, happy hours spent together in the wood last night had strengthened the bond of comradeship between them ; Dick and the two elder children had been keenly alive to it, and it was this that had made it possible for him to make his suggestion.

" But can you spare the time to be with us so much ? " Nancy enquired. " Oughtn't you to be looking after other travellers ? "

Dick re-assured her. It was children that he was mainly responsible for. Of course, when anybody needed a hand with a car he must give it, but otherwise he was at their service. In fact he had mentioned them in his report to his employers, and they were fully satisfied that he was doing his job in looking after them.

" But where is Omberley ? " they asked. " Is it on the Gleambridge road ? "

Dick gave them the direction. They could easily reach it by the afternoon, he said, and once there he was sure they would not want to leave it. And then there was the common up above it—such a common ! And beyond the village on the edge of the common

perhaps a glimpse of the cathedral! The cathedral? Nancy responded instantly. To see it from this side of the hills—had that not been the desire of her heart for the last two days? The Birdstone glimpse, being so shadowy and remote did not count, she said—though it had resulted in a poem!

“Don’t make too sure of seeing it,” Dick advised her. “It will probably be blotted out to-day even if the rain keeps off.”

He arranged a time for lunch in case they should not meet before then, and at the same time fixed tea at Omerley for about six o’clock. He meant, of course, to keep a casual eye on them in between whiles, but because of the new comradeship between them, because of their trust in him he did not wish to hamper their movements or rob their adventure of any of its charm.

The children set off down the hill to Barsdon in high spirits. Modestine, refreshed by her long rest, was in her most angelic mood, and seemed glad to be with the children again after her lonely day in the meadow.

Montague, before they reached the village, put his hand in his pocket and produced five shining shillings. The other children looked at them in blank astonishment.

“It’s for picture-frames,” he explained. “Mr. Frampton ordered five while you were getting Modestine ready this morning, and he’s going to take a

photo of each of us and of Modestine and keep them in the frames *always*. So we've twelve-and-sixpence now," he added proudly, handing the money over to Billy. "Twelve-and-fivepence when we've bought the tin-tacks."

"How ripping!" Billy exclaimed, accepting the money unhesitatingly. "Let's get a really decent lunch, shall we? We can buy it in Barsdon."

Barsdon shops, however, had nothing very exciting to offer them. Bread and cheese, some rather dry-looking corned beef, a large bag of buns and dough-nuts and some sour-looking apples was the best they could do. As far as they themselves were concerned, it was good enough, but they would certainly have liked something better to have offered Mr. Frampton.

They passed very near to the Brimscombes' house and looked about eagerly for some sign of Nonie or her mother, but neither of them was to be seen. Reluctantly they passed on down the Gleambridge road and soon Barsdon lay behind them. Just a cluster of houses amidst the hills it seemed now as they looked back, nevertheless to the children it was unforgettable. So much had happened there, such a mixture of trouble and happiness, yet, somehow, the troubles seemed to have faded into unimportance, and their thoughts lingered about the happiness. Nonie and her mother and "When we come to stay at Barsdon"—that was all the talk now, and the hills piled up about them were simply excluded by the

vision. And adventure? Well, of course, there had been no *real* adventure in Barsdon, but *could* adventure, they wondered, be more thrilling, more interesting than the finding of Nonie and Mrs. Brimscombe?

There was a chilliness in the air this morning that sent them hurrying on. The sun came out fitfully, but whether it was there or not seemed to make very little difference to-day. How could you be anything but care-free when you felt yourselves to be almost millionaires? Once or twice Dick passed them and paused each time for a chat. How nice to meet someone you knew, they thought; what a friendliness it gave to the hills.

Presently Nancy's imagination found a way through the fun and laughter and pointed out to her the beauty of the hills on this grey, gleamy day. Being so much a child of sunshine and shadows herself she loved a day such as this; it exhilarated her, and the hills, with their intense, dusky curtain of mist against the silver of the sky, were to her even more attractive than in the clear sunlight.

The morning slipped happily by, and just before one o'clock they found Dick waiting for them half-way up a gentle slope.

"I was beginning to feel hungry," he announced when they came up with him, "and I thought this bit of grass would make a decent camping-ground; it would be colder on the top. Is anybody else ready for lunch?" he enquired, with a smile.

Were they not? Who would not be in this keen hill air? Even Aunt Hewlett would have been satisfied with their capacity for putting away food to-day.

"We *always* seem to eat a lot out of doors," Nancy sighed, as after the last bun had disappeared they attacked a bag of chocolates Dick had provided. "We're just as bad at picnics at home, and when we go fishing in Daddy Petherham's boat—well!"

"Some day," said Dick, "you must come on the river with me."

"When we get home?" Nancy exclaimed. "How lovely! Oh, but," she added, remembering his wardenship, "what about your work?"

"It's only a temporary job," Dick replied.

"How rotten!" said Billy. "That'll mean finding another one, won't it?"

"Oh, I shall do that easily enough," Dick replied lightly, as he helped them fix their blankets on to the saddle.

They felt, when presently they turned to wave good-bye, that they were leaving an old friend behind them.

"It must be because it's an out-of-doors friendship," Nancy said, "it makes a difference, just as it does to one's appetite!"

The road at the top of the hill opened out into a wide, sweeping common, much more interesting-looking than the flat plain they had found at the top of Birdstone. However, there was no time for even

Nancy to set her imagination at work upon the view, for a car just ahead with someone lying under it, evidently busy with repairs, attracted their attention. Exactly why someone lying under a car should prove more attractive than the hills that had lured them from home they could not have explained. People and things and happenings *always* seemed to be pushing themselves in front of the hills—that was all they knew about the matter.

“We’d better see if they want help,” Billy said. “I could run back and call Mr. Frampton.”

When they came up with the car they discovered that the person who was lying under it was a girl. In the car was a thin, elderly person, who was leaning out and abusing the girl in a shrill, high-pitched voice. She had evidently worked herself up into a decidedly bad temper.

“She’s an aunt!” Montague whispered. “A great-aunt!”

He stared at the girl who was grappling with the repairs, less in sympathy, it must be confessed, than curiosity; he was experiencing a certain unholy satisfaction that someone else, not he, was the sufferer this time.

“That’s the kind of thing *I* had to put up with,” he whispered bitterly to Mavis. “’Spect she’s feeling jolly miserable!”

At this moment the girl wriggled out from under the car. To Montague’s utter astonishment, however,

the crushed, miserable expression he had expected to see was not there. The girl was actually smiling kindly and good-humouredly (almost as one would smile at a troublesome child) at the bad-tempered aunt-person.

“Don’t stand staring, Monty dear,” Mavis whispered hastily. “It’s not polite.”

Meanwhile, Billy, feeling far more scared than he ever had done of Aunt Hewlett, advanced towards the occupant of the car.

“Have you had a breakdown?” he asked politely. “’Cos the Warden of the Hills is only a little way down the hill, and we could call him for you if you would like us to.”

“The what?” shrieked the old lady.

“The Warden of the Travellers in the Hills!” Billy repeated.

“Mr. Frampton, you know,” Nancy further explained. “He has to help travellers when things go wrong.”

The young lady looked interested, but the old lady after staring—very rudely, the children thought—shouted:

“Warden fiddlesticks! Some infamous wretch, I’ll be bound!”

Now Montague, though his own aunt might occasionally be too much for him, felt a strong desire working within him to battle with this “stranger-aunt,” as he called her to himself, and before either

of the others could defend their friend he had stepped forward.

"Mr. Frampton's no more a wretch than you are," he growled, glaring at the old lady with all his old, impish defiance, "an' nobody'd better say he is to me—that's all! He's my friend; he's the friend of us all, isn't he, Nancy?"

Nancy was about to reply, but the old lady interrupted her.

"Go on, boy!" she cried. "Let me hear the fate of anyone who persists in calling him the names he deserves!"

"Well, they'd better *not* persist!" Montague rumbled darkly. "It's lies if they do!"

The old lady cackled out her enjoyment of what she considered, apparently, a joke, and whispered something to the girl about "delightful subterranean rumblings," then, suddenly her mood changed again, and, regardless of the children's offer, she bade the girl get to work again on the car, abusing her peevishly for her incapability and enquiring what time she proposed to arrive at Gleambridge.

The girl, with a hopeless shake of her head and a smile for the children, again slid under the car, and the old lady, to their surprise, subsided into her seat and closed her eyes.

Montague leaned down to the girl behind the car.

"Do you hate that aunt?" he whispered.

The girl raised herself and shook her head.

"No—I like her. But she's not my aunt—I'm her companion."

"Oh!" Montague was decidedly disappointed.

"Why is she so horrid to you?" Nancy whispered.

"Don't you mind it?"

"Not in the least," the girl replied. "She can't help it, poor dear. It's nerves. Besides, I've been a Red Cross nurse, and had experience with matrons and things!"

They looked mystified.

"She's a lamb compared with hospital matrons," the girl explained. "Besides, she's fond of me. To-morrow she'll give me a spanking box of 'chocs' or a new frock to make up for this."

"How queer!" Nancy exclaimed.

"You see," the girl whispered, "this car is a good old 'has-been,' and she knows it, but nothing on earth will induce her to admit as much, because her only son who was killed in the war bought it. She'll keep it till it drops to pieces, and continue abusing the roads and me—but she knows I understand."

"Here's Mr. Frampton!" cried Mavis, who was waiting patiently near by with Modestine.

"Oh," Nancy sighed in relief, "I'm so glad! He'll make it go if anyone can."

Dick, seeing the children, drew up and waited expectantly. Nancy ran to him and whispered an explanation of the affair.

"Do make it go for her and if the old lady is horrid

to you don't mind—it's only nerves! We told her you were the Warden and she wasn't very nice."

"All right," Dick replied, "I'll see what can be done. But don't wait for me," he added. "It's time you were getting on to Omberley." He feared that the tactless old lady might give him away, and this he would not have had happen just now for the world.

The children reluctantly bade the girl good-bye.

"Just when you get interested, on you always go again," Nancy sighed.

"If she'd been an aunt," Montague growled, "then she wouldn't have been sorry to-morrow. Aunts aren't ever sorry—not *great*-aunts," he added hastily, seeing protest in Mavis's attitude.

CHAPTER XVII

AWAKENING

IN after days, Nancy found that her sub-conscious self (she did not, of course, call it that) had stored up impressions of the spacious view. Grey, ineffaceable impressions that seemed a fitting prelude to tragedy. Nevertheless, her conscious self was still occupied with the strange couple they had left behind on the common ; for people, especially if they were somewhat out of the ordinary, never failed to rouse her interest.

“There’s so much to *wonder* about them”, she would say.

And she was wondering a great deal about those two when presently Dick came up with them. Nancy noticed immediately that he was troubled about something.

“It’s that car,” he explained, in answer to her enquiry. “The bally thing ought to be on the scrap-heap, but the old lady won’t part with it, as you know.”

Then he went on to explain the obsolete mechanism of the thing, and how he had promised to run into Gleambridge to see if it was possible to get some new parts that would fix them up for a time. Of his very interesting interview with the old lady, of her pointed remarks about the condition of his roads—if he was in truth Warden of the Hills—of her enjoyment of his discomfiture, and her demands that he should get them out of their predicament he said nothing.

Demands apart, however, he could not, in common humanity, leave her and her companion stranded. He knew that he must go to Gleambridge, yet what was to be done about the children? He did not at all care about leaving them for so long—besides, he was anxious to see them settled at Omberley before the rain came; it could not hold off much longer, he was sure. If only he could have persuaded them all to accompany him to Gleambridge—but then, of course, there was Modestine. No, he must think of some other plan.

He talked the matter over with the children and finally Billy made a suggestion. If Mr. Frampton would take the girls in the car as far as Omberley he could show them where to stay for the night. They could then meet the boys at the entrance to the village and take them to the rooms where they would await tea for him.

“That’s an excellent idea,” said Dick. “If I can’t get that derelict fixed up by six o’clock it will have to be abandoned.” He helped Nancy and Mavis into the car. “Better tumble the blankets in, too, Billy, in case the rain comes before you reach Omberley.”

It seemed to Nancy as they sped over the wide, sweeping common that they were on the very top of the world.

“Are there *really* places higher than this?” she gasped, for the clean, cold air took her breath away.

“Much, much higher!” Dick replied, with an amused laugh. “Are you enjoying it?”

“Oh, it’s ‘toxicating!’” she laughed, “isn’t it, Mavis? It makes one feel ‘spasmy.’”



*Dick stopped the car at a pretty little house half-way
down the village.*

"What a wild little creature she is," thought Dick, glancing down at the excited little face. He was glad that the forest and river that he loved so dearly had had a hand in the making of Nancy.

Quite suddenly the road swung round to the left and they came upon Omberley snuggling against the hillside. Nancy, of course, did some "sky-climbing" when she saw it. "Sky-climbing," Mavis explained to Dick, was a family word for Nancy's enthusiasms.

"Well, I can't help it," Nancy replied, "if he brings me suddenly from the top of the world to a lovely baby village nestling in its mother's arms. 'Sides, he says lots of artists come to paint it—p'raps *you* will when you're bigger!" for already little Mavis was showing promise of being an artist.

Dick stopped the car at a pretty little house half-way down the village. He left the children outside while he went in to make arrangements; these, apparently, did not take long, for he soon returned followed by a pleasant-faced woman.

"Mrs. Halliday has come to take the blankets in and to be introduced to you," he explained. "She's going to get us a splendid tea, and you are all to come here as soon as you like. The sooner the better," he added. "You'd get drenched up on that common in the rain. You'll be happy and comfortable here; won't they, Mrs. Halliday?"

Mrs. Halliday replied that it would not be her fault if they were not, and, after a few final directions, they

bade her good-bye "for a little while." At the top of the village Dick pointed out an hotel where they could leave Modestine and then, very reluctantly, set out for Gleambridge.

Nancy and Mavis sauntered slowly back across the common. As yet there was no sign of the boys, so, keeping one eye on the road, they explored some of the many fascinating little paths amongst the bushes. It was a wonderful common, quite different from anything they had ever seen before and seemed to offer endless possibilities. The "make-believe" games that might be played there! After tea, if it was fine, they simply *must* come here to play. So interested were they both that they almost forgot to keep an eye on the road, and it was not until they heard a frantic shout of recognition that they realized how far they had strayed.

They flew back across the common, but, before they could reach the boys, large drops of rain began to fall. Billy, seeing some possibility of shelter behind the bushes, urged Modestine across the grass to join them.

"We'd better wait a little while," he shouted to the girls. "Daddy Petherham," he added, turning to Montague, "would say it's only going to be a shower if he saw that sky. But he'd say there's lots more coming presently—worse luck!"

The girls were waiting for them by a large hawthorn bush, and they all huddled together, with Modestine, who hated getting wet, in their midst.

“ Jolly good thing we’ve arranged to sleep indoors to-night,” Billy said, as he watched the driving rain. “ Did Mr. Frampton manage to fix things up ? ”

“ Yes, indeed, and at the dinkiest little cottage, too, and you’ll simply *love* Omberley ! ” Nancy replied, enthusiastically.

“ *And* this common ! ” Mavis added eagerly. “ We just had to explore a little. I *wish* you’d both been here ! ”

Presently, the rain ceased and, for the first time during the afternoon, the sun shone brilliantly.

“ It’s going to be fine for a little while anyway ! ” they cried hopefully, but they had spent too many hours in wise old Daddy Petherham’s company to mistake that brilliance. The boys, however, had been looking about them while they were sheltering and they too found delightful possibilities tucked away behind those alluring common paths.

“ There’d be time just to go down there,” Billy said eagerly, pointing to a path that led towards what seemed to be a kind of fort.

“ Mr. Frampton said not to hang about too long,” Nancy replied doubtfully. “ I b’lieve he worries rather about us, you know.”

“ Well, we won’t stay long, but it’s not nearly six yet, and ’sides we’d be miserable stuffed up in a cottage for hours. Just down this *one* path, then we’ll go straight to the cottage.”

There seemed no immediate prospect of another shower, so Nancy gave in, and four eager children

and one somewhat reluctant donkey set out on a voyage of discovery across the common. The fort was further off than they had imagined, but nobody thought of turning back for they did not come upon anything so interesting *every* day !

A real fort ! How did it get there ? Was it ever used ? They could see no sign of soldiers, nor even a sentry. A fort with no defenders, with no enemy to storm it ? Oh, impossible !

“ Just *one* little game ! ” Billy cried eagerly. “ Modestine can graze ; there’s lots of cows and horses over there so she’ll be quite happy.”

“ Well, just five minutes ! ” Nancy conceded.

Five minutes when you have to defend your country with your very life against a persistent enemy ? Who could think of paltry minutes, who could have eyes for gathering storm-clouds when all your resources are being called upon to defend your hearth and home from a merciless enemy ?

And so half an hour or more slipped away, and a grey mist crept up and shut out the Gleambridge valley and the distant hills. Great, piled-up storm-clouds rolled nearer and nearer, but it was not until a terrific clap of thunder, that might almost have been the booming of one of their own imaginary guns, brought them back to earth with a start that they realized what was happening.

“ Oh ! ” cried Nancy in dismay, “ what *will* Mr. Frampton say ? We ought to have gone long ago.”

"Yes," Billy replied guiltily. "Here comes the rain! It's no use sheltering; it's going to be a terrific thunder-storm. We'd better fly."

They looked round for Modestine, but she was nowhere in sight. Horses and cows were huddled together under a high wall beyond the fort, but Modestine was not amongst them. Now what was to be done? They could not possibly leave the poor little animal out in the storm; they would have to stay and find her.

"Oh, I hope we find her quick," Mavis said, in a frightened little voice. "I hate this horrid thunder and lightning."

Nancy could tell by the way she clung to her hand that she was thoroughly frightened, and was not surprised, for she herself felt suddenly small and helpless up here on the top of the world exposed to all the fury of the storm.

"Monty," she said, "you and Mavis run on to Jessamine Cottage and Billy and I'll look for Modestine. Tell Mrs. Halliday we won't be long, Mavis."

For a moment Mavis clung to Nancy as though unwilling to leave her.

"It's all right, Mavis," Montague said soothingly, "I'll take care of you, dear."

He took her hand firmly in his, and, for once, Mavis did not trouble to see whether it was clean or not.

"Don't be long, will you?" she pleaded, as Nancy turned away to join Billy in his search.

"No, I s'pect she's just behind some of the bushes.

Take care of her, Monty," and, feeling that the proudest moment in his life had arrived, Montague ran with his little charge in the direction of Omberley.

Nancy joined Billy in his search. The rain was coming down with such force and the wind was beating so pitilessly across the open common that they found it difficult to hold up against it. Neither of them would own that they were scared when the lightning zigzagged about them, but each wished devoutly that Modestine would appear soon.

Suddenly, through the fury of the storm they heard a welcome, familiar sound—the sound of a most pathetic braying. They lifted up their heads and listened.

"Why, she's just over there!" Billy cried. "I can just see her sticking out of that kind of shelter arrangement. I'll run on and fetch her; don't bother to come all the way."

Feeling very much relieved, Billy ran towards Modestine. He ran with eyes half-closed and head lowered to avoid the blinding rain, and thus it was that he did not see a forlorn, draggled-looking cow drawing near to the shelter.

"Ladybird! Modestine! Come on, old girl, we're waiting for you, and we're drenched through. Hurry!"

Modestine, hearing her little master's voice, looked up, but instead of seeing his familiar face she encountered that of the cow. Now, whether it was the storm that scared her or the harmless face of the cow Billy could never say; all that he knew at the time was

that Modestine flew past him in terror. After that he knew very little, for suddenly all was confusion.

Nancy could never be sure, either, exactly how the accident occurred. She was not near enough to see more than a jumble of Billy, cow, and donkey; then, the mad rush of Modestine, and her brother lying very still just outside the shelter.

She flew, terrified, towards him, and, flinging herself on the wet grass at his side, leaned over him. Whenever action was demanded of her, Nancy's imagination was always thrust into the background, and so, though Billy's face was deathly white, she did not pause to indulge in the Biggest Fear of All. She unfastened his collar and tie and then raised his head gently on to her knee. What else could she do? There was no need for water, for the rain was beating down on the boy's upturned face. Was there *nothing* to be done? Had she just to sit here patiently waiting for life to return. Oh, it was unbearable! Why did she not know what to do? If only she had not sent the other two on, she thought regretfully, Monty could have run to the village for help. She looked about her, but the common, as much of it as was in sight, was deserted. Back on the road she could hear the sound of a car, but it would be gone before she could get near enough to wave to the occupants. It was not Mr. Frampton's car she knew, for it was coming from the wrong direction. If only he would come along—ah, what a relief that would be.

Nobody came, however, and she remained sitting there in the rain watching Billy's face with anxious, passionate love in her eyes.

At length, after what seemed an eternity to Nancy, Billy opened his eyes and looked about him vaguely.

"I think I've hurt my head a bit," he said, "it feels rather rotten. Why, you're sitting on the wet grass, Nancy! I'll get up."

He tried to rise, but fell back with a sharp cry of pain.

"It's my leg," he groaned. "Is it broken, Nancy?"

"I don't know, Billy dear—I couldn't see what happened. Shall I look and see?"

Billy shook his head.

"I—I couldn't bear to have it touched," he whispered, for he was almost too exhausted with the pain to speak.

He closed his eyes. Apparently he had forgotten that Nancy was still sitting on the damp grass, for he rested his head on her lap and held her hand tight. Nancy looked down at him in despair. It was awful to see him suffering so horribly and not be able to relieve him. She dared not even suggest lifting him into the cattle-shelter out of the rain for fear she might further injure his leg.

"If someone doesn't come along soon I shall *have* to leave him and run for help," she thought.

The thunder still rolled amongst the surrounding hills, but only distantly now; she was glad of this, for the horrid thunder seemed to add terror to the accident.

"Nancy!" Billy spoke feebly, and Nancy leaned down to catch his words. "How shall we tell Mother? She'll be awfully worried about it."

Now, there was an unwritten law amongst the three children that their mother must be saved as far as possible from all trouble. Their quarrels were suspended at the first whisper of "Mother's coming!" because it hurt them to see a certain sad, grieved expression that was always on Mother's face if she caught them at it unawares. They wanted to ward off all sorrow, all grief; they hated it to come anywhere near that beloved mother; they hated anyone who caused her suffering. Dick, realizing from their conversation something of this protective love of theirs, had, as before mentioned, dreaded the awakening for them when they should realize the anxiety she had suffered after their disappearance. *That* anxiety they could never wholly realize; they had left a letter of explanation, so why should anyone worry? Were they not used to wandering about the forest with Modestine? Only in the daytime, of course; but still everybody knew they were not helpless babies who could not be trusted.

Nevertheless, because of that unwritten law, both Billy and Nancy were beginning to realize that they ought never to have come.

"It was all my fault," Billy whispered. "I'll tell her it was me, Nancy."

"You won't!" Nancy replied passionately. "I'm

older, an' I ought to have thought more, and not just gone on dreaming stupid dreams about hills that aren't a bit nicer'n our forest. I ought to have *known* we're too young to go off like this. When you're older you know what to do with accidents, an' all I can do is to sit here and wait for a grown-up!" Nancy leaned down and pressed her lips to Billy's hot forehead. "I *wish* it had been me," she added.

Billy half opened his eyes.

"No, it's right for it to be me," he persisted, "it *was* my fault, Nan." He was silent for a moment. "Tell Mr. Frampton *everything*—from the beginning. And—and—oh, I *wish* he'd come!"

He turned his head away, and if there were tears in his eyes Nancy was not allowed to see them. She knew that they were there, however, and felt desperately that something must be done. She thought of the Prior's telegram, but could one send telegrams from so small a village as Omberley? She feared not. Well, if she did not meet Mr. Frampton she must get help from the village and send Monty back along the road to fetch the girl who belonged to the derelict car. If she had been a nurse in the war she would surely know what to do for a broken leg.

"Shall you mind being left just for a little while?" she asked Billy gently.

He shook his head.

"No. But you'll come straight back yourself, won't you? I—I want you, Nan."

Nancy tenderly re-assured him. Then she rose, and, making a pillow of her raincoat (fortunately Dick had insisted on both the girls keeping their raincoats with them), she slipped it under Billy's head. She was just about to turn away when she caught sight of Modestine coming towards them.

"Oh!" she cried, with relief, "here's Modestine, Billy. She'll take care of you while I'm away. She'd be sorry if she understood, wouldn't she?"

"Yes—it wasn't her fault really. I'm glad she's come." For neither of them could feel the slightest resentment towards the little animal, who was indirectly responsible for the accident, knowing that the blame rested primarily with themselves.

The rain had now stopped. Nancy felt glad of this as she flew across the common for there had seemed something so relentless in the steady downpour with Billy lying there entirely at its mercy. She looked to right and left when she reached the road, but not a soul was in sight.

"I'll have to go to that hotel," she thought. "It's the nearest place."

She turned into the village street, and to her surprise and joy what should she see standing outside the hotel but the derelict car! Ah, *now* she could get help! Utterly regardless of her dishevelled appearance, she ran up the steps and burst into the lounge. It was full of people, but that did not trouble Nancy, for the person she wanted was there—that was all that mat-

tered. She brushed past several astonished tea drinkers and ran straight to the erratic old lady and her companion.

"Oh," she cried breathlessly, "please will you come at once? Billy's broken his leg and Mr. Frampton isn't back from Gleambridge yet, and he's out on the common with only Modestine. Could you *hurry*, please, and bring someone to help carry him? It hurts him terribly, an' so does his head."

The girl rose instantly and glanced at the old lady.

"Everything that's necessary," the latter replied tersely, in answer to an enquiry in the girl's eyes. "And no expense to be spared. She'll be ready—with somebody else's car—in about three minutes, child," she added, turning to Nancy, for the girl had already disappeared.

Nancy looked up at her and quite suddenly a special instinct she had for seeing *behind* people told her that the old lady was to be trusted.

"Billy wants me to go back at once with them," she said hurriedly, "and Mavis and Monty are at a place called Jessamine Cottage, and don't know anything about the accident——"

"No need to worry about them—I'll go immediately. And you can trust Miss Hammond, child—keep her as long as you need her. She managed to get the car here and here it and I can stay. Here she comes! Now, off you go!"

Nancy's eyes brimmed with gratitude as she fol-

lowed Miss Hammond and two strangers towards a car that was awaiting them. Now, just as she was about to step into it Dick came dashing along the common road, and glancing down the street saw and recognized her. He drew up instantly and shouted to her.

"Oh," she cried, her voice trembling with relief, "there's Mr. Frampton! Please, he'll take me to Billy. But you'll come too, won't you?" she asked, turning to Miss Hammond.

"We'll all come," one of the men said kindly. "Your friend may need us to help carry the little chap."

Dick held Nancy close while Miss Hammond briefly made the necessary explanations and she nestled to him, knowing that their dear, big comrade would take over all responsibility now.

"We'll never, never go away by ourselves again," she thought. "It's an awful, awful world when you've got to try and manage and no grown-ups to help you to think what to do. Everything'll be better now Mr. Frampton's come. How glad Billy will be."

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Three days later Nancy was sitting on the stone seat in the Sunk Garden of the Priory, awaiting the Prior. Billy was settled for the night in the charge of the new nurse who had come to relieve Miss Hammond in order that she might return to her duties as companion, and Mother was resting.

The swallows swooped and circled around her, but this evening she had no thoughts to spare for them.

There was so much to think about ; things to puzzle out—big, important things.

Nothing could ever efface the sadness behind Mother's forgiveness ; the half-hour with her when she had sobbed out her contrition was one Nancy could never forget ; Mother's few, gently-spoken words had opened up a new world of responsibility to her. And then the memory of Billy's face when they had lifted him into the car ; the memory, too, of his suffering during the ride to the Priory (Dick had taken them there not only because it was so much nearer than Nestcombe, but because he knew that his uncle would feel his responsibility in the matter and would wish to bear, as far as possible, both the trouble and expense), and the awful thought of four long months of imprisonment for out-of-doors Billy ; all these things forced themselves upon Nancy and overwhelmed her with bitter regret.

" An' 'tisen't as if he could let off steam and do some grumblings sometimes," she thought miserably. " He'll feel he's got to try to keep them in as well as the pain, when Mother's there specially, 'cos it's all our fault."

And yet, bitterly as she regretted ever having listened to the voice of the hills, she could not help but wonder whether that adventure of theirs was wholly wrong. For instance, there was Nonie. She must surely have been drowned if Billy had not been there to save her. And then again, there were Monty and Jocelyne, and Aunt Letty and Uncle Jim. Surely

the adventuring was going to be responsible for a good deal of happiness where those four were concerned ! Nancy, clasping her hands round her knees, smiled a little tearfully as she recalled the scene that had taken place under the Prior's beeches the day after the accident.

First, there had been Jocelyne, a beautiful, eager, impulsive Jocelyne running across the lawn with outstretched arms to Monty.

" Oh, Monty," she had cried, " I thought I didn't love you because you're so naughty and troublesome, but I find I do ! I've missed you awfully, and it's been hateful living with aunt without you."

Montague stared at her in surprise.

" I haven't missed you," he replied slowly. " I've been happy."

" But won't you be friends now ? " Jocelyne pleaded, all her pride humbled for, perhaps, the first time in her life. " I'll be good to you, Monty."

Montague hesitated and it was Mavis who decided the matter.

" She's nice, Monty, I like her. Be quick and make it up with her, then we can all be friends together."

What could Montague do but obey his kind little tyrant ? And then, while the four of them were talking together, three of them at least wishing that Billy had been there with them, across the lawn with the Prior and Aunt Letty had come no less a person than " nearly-Uncle Jim."

"That's my guardian," Montague growled; "s'pose he's come to fetch me, but I'm not going back to Aunt's."

"Your guardian!" they echoed. "But it's someone who nearly married Aunt Letty!"

"Oh!" cried Nancy, her ready imagination grasping the situation, "that's why the Nestley side of River-sham hurt him! I *said* it wasn't just an ordinary ache!"

But Mavis, too, had grasped the situation, and while they were talking and wondering she had run towards Aunt Letty and thrown her arms around her.

"Aunt Letty, dear, please won't you hurry up and be friends with Uncle Jim again and marry him? You see, I promised Monty he should have you to be his mother 'cos he hasn't got one. He hates aunts, but if he forgets you're one he thinks he could love you and, oh, he does need someone to keep him clean and love him. But he can't be your little boy, can he, if you hate his guardian?"

"I don't hate him!" Aunt Letty replied hastily, and Nancy, who had drawn near with Jocelyne and Monty, thought how pretty her eyes looked as she spoke.

"Then you'll marry him quick and be Monty's mother-guardian?" Mavis cried, clasping her hands eagerly.

"And mine!" Jocelyne broke in impulsively.

"The guardian-angel of us all," said Uncle Jim, and Nancy knew by the happy assurance in his voice that he and Aunt Letty must have made up their quarrel before joining them on the lawn.

" 'Spect the Prior made them," she thought, looking up affectionately at the latter's twinkling face.

" But what does Monty say ? " asked Aunt Letty, kneeling down by the boy and taking his hands in hers. " There won't be much ' angel ' about it, I'm afraid. Just pals, you know, who love and trust each other. Will you risk it, Monty dear ? "

Montague stared silently at the young, kind face before him. Was this an aunt ? Why, she seemed friendly—just like Mr. Frampton.

" I didn't know aunts was like you," he said simply. Aunt Letty smiled and waited questioningly. Then, perceiving that she was not fully satisfied, Montague leaned forward and, for the first time since his mother's death, voluntarily kissed a " grown-up." " It isn't going to be any risk—not for *me*," he replied. " Nor for you either—you'll see ! " he added, and though his voice rumbled volcanically, it was because of the strange new fire of happiness that was burning within him.

And so, as she recalled that scene, Nancy could not but feel happy that some good at least had come out of their thoughtless adventure. And there was the Prior, too—how glad he seemed of their love, yes, and even Uncle Val would be glad that they were fond of Lionel's father. Oh, that hill country that had seemed so remote, those hill people who had seemed almost foreigners, how near they were, how closely linked, after all, with the forest and forest people.

Well, the adventure, if adventure it might be called,

was over, unless staying on at the Priory with Mother and Billy could be called a continuation of it. For Mavis and Monty, at least, it was finished, Nancy thought, for they had gone home with Aunt Letty yesterday. Modestine, too, was probably cropping grass unadventurously in the home paddock, for she had been sent back in the charge of one of the monks. Nancy smiled as she recalled the Prior's confession of his "make-believe" monks. It was dear of him, she thought, to have entered into the spirit of their adventure as he had done ; she loved him for it. Well, the monks were just ordinary gardeners and butlers after all, but the Prior himself would never be anything but "Prior dear" to them.

Above the Priory wall the evening sunlight was bathing the distant hills. Nancy watched it, the imagination part of her drinking it in rapturously. Somewhere tucked away in the heart of those sun-kissed hills were Nonie and her mother. Strange, she thought, how all the very nicest happenings had been connected with people. Grown-ups, of course, would think "adventure" too big a word to be applied to those happenings. At the time, she herself and Billy had doubted whether they might be called such, but, now, in looking back, Nancy was not so sure. The encounter with Dick (they were all to call him that now), the finding of Monty, the rescuing of Nonie, the Prior's courteous reception of them, and the thrill of finding that he was Lionel's father, above all the recon-

ciliation of Aunt Letty and Uncle Jim, surely there was adventure in all these happenings!

"Oh, if only it needn't have turned out so cruelly for Billy," Nancy thought. "Well, we've promised Mother to settle down to everyday life until we're grown-up, so there won't be any more adventure now for years and years."

Footsteps aroused her from her reverie, and, looking up, she saw the Prior coming towards her. She ran to meet him eagerly, and together they paced up and down the old Sunk Garden.

"Making poems, little girl?" asked the Prior.

"No," Nancy replied, "I've just been thinking."

"Important thoughts?"

"Well, I don't know," she replied slowly. "It's only that we've promised to settle down quietly till we're grown-up and it seems such a long time to wait for any more adventure. It's Billy who will mind most, I'm afraid. You see, he must *do* things, but we never, never will go away again however tired we get of playing in the garden. 'Sides——'

The Prior looked down at her questioningly.

"Yes?"

"Oh, only that the garden and the river and the forest, I b'lieve, are the nicest places in the world, after all. If—if only something would *happen* there—if only one didn't just meet people in an ordinary, everyday way, if only adventure could be at home 'stead of you having to go and find it!"

"But you don't!" the Prior re-assured her. "If you want adventure it will come to you whether you go out to meet it or stay at home. Take my advice, little girl. Let adventure seek *you*—it's waiting for you round every corner. You've only to beckon, and it will come dancing towards you."

"Really and truly?" Nancy asked breathlessly. "But how? I don't quite see *how*!"

"You will some day. Did Dick or I or Monty or Nonie and her mother or your Rose-Vicar seek you little people? And yet you have been adventure, the Biggest Adventure of All for every one of us."

"*We* have been adventure for *you*?" Nancy repeated slowly. "Why, I never thought of that, and I'm sure Billy didn't."

She looked up into the Prior's face incredulously. How could three children bring adventure to grown-up people? Surely he was mistaken? Surely the Rose-Vicar, at least, would not agree with him? The Biggest Adventure of All!

"What *is* the Biggest Adventure of All?" she asked, as they climbed the steps to return to the house.

The Prior smiled inscrutably.

"Ah, *that* you must find out for yourselves," he replied. "You will know some day."





